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THE WRECKERS

BY FRANCIS LYNDE

THE WRECKERS

DAVID VALLORY

BRANDED

STRANDED IN ARCADY

AFTER THE MANNER OF MEN

THE REAL MAN

THE CITY OF NUMBERED DAYS

THE HONORABLE SENATOR SAGE-BRUSH

SCIENTIFIC SPRAGUE

THE PRICE

THE TAMING OF RED BUTTE WESTERN

A ROMANCE IN TRANSIT

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

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ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

"You have spoken only of the difficulties and responsibilities, Graham, but there is another side to it."

THE WRECKERS

BY

FRANCIS LYNDE

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

ARTHUR E. BECHER

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
NEW YORK 1920

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Published March, 1920

To a certain grave and reverend official of the Union Pacific System who, in his younger days, might well have played the part of *Jimmie Dodds*, this book is affectionately inscribed by

THE AUTHOR.

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THE WRECKERS

THE WRECKERS

I

At Sand Creek Siding

AS a general proposition, I don't believe much in the things called "hunches." They are bad for the digestion, and as often as not are like those patent barometers that are always pointing to "Set Fair" when it is raining like Noah's flood. But there are exceptions to all rules, and we certainly uncovered the biggest one of the lot—the boss and I—the night we left Portland and the good old Pacific Coast.

It was this way. We had finished the construction work on the Oregon Midland; had quit, cleaned up the offices, drawn our last pay-checks, told everybody good-by, and were on our way to the train, when I had one of those queer little premonitory chills you hear so much about and knew just as well as could be that we were never going to pull through to Chicago without getting a jolt of some sort. The reason—if you'll call it a reason—was that, just before we came to the railroad station, the boss

walked calmly under a ladder standing in front of a new building; and besides that, it was the thirteenth day of the month, a Friday, and raining like the very mischief.

Just to sort of toll us along, maybe, the fates didn't begin on us that night. They waited until the next day, and then proceeded to shove us in behind a freight-train wreck at Widner, Idaho, where we lost twelve hours. It looked as if that didn't amount to much, because we weren't due anywhere at any particular time. The boss was on his way home for a little visit with his folks in Illinois, and beyond that he was going to meet a bunch of Englishmen in Montreal, and maybe let them make him General Manager of one of the Canadian railroads.

So Mr. Norcross was in no special hurry, and neither was I. I wasn't under pay, but I expected to be when we reached Canada. I had been confidential clerk and shorthand man for the boss on the Midland construction, and he was taking me along partly because he knows a cracking good stenographer when he sees one, but mostly because I was dead anxious to go anywhere he was going.

But to come back to the Widner delay: if it hadn't been for that twelve-hour lay-out we would have caught the Saturday night train on the Pioneer Short Line, instead of the day train Sunday morning, and there would have been no meeting with Mrs.

Sheila and Maisie Ann; no telegram from Mr. Chadwick, because it wouldn't have found us; no hold-up at Sand Creek Siding; in short, nothing would have happened that did happen. But I mustn't get ahead of my story.

It was on Sunday that the jolt began to get ready to land on us. Mr. Norcross had been a railroad man for so long that he had forgotten how to knock off on Sundays, and right soon after breakfast, with the help of a little Pullman berth table and me and my typewriter, he turned our section into a business office, saying that now we had a good quiet day, we'd clean up the million or so odds and ends of correspondence he'd been letting go while we were tussling for the Midland right-of-way through the Oregon mountains.

By this time, you will understand, we were rocketing along over the Pioneer Short Line, and were supposed to be due at Portal City at half-past seven that evening. From where he sat dictating to me the boss was facing forward and now and then an absent sort of look came into his eyes while he was talking off his letters, and it puzzled me because it wasn't like him. I may as well say here as anywhere that one of his strong points is to be always "at himself" under all sorts of conditions.

So, as I say, I was sort of puzzled; and one of the times after he had given me a full grist of let-

ters and had gone off to smoke while I typed a few thousand lines from my notes to catch up, I made a discovery. There were two people in Section Five just ahead of us, a young woman and a girl of maybe fifteen or so, and the Pullman was the old-fashioned kind, with low seat-backs. I put it up that in those absent-eyed intervals Mr. Norcross had been studying the back of the young woman's neck. I was measurably sure it wasn't the little girl's.

Along in the forenoon I made an excuse to go and get a drink of water out of the forward cooler, and on the way back I took a good square look at our neighbors in Number Five. At that I didn't wonder at the boss's temporary lapses any more whatever. The young woman was pretty enough to start a stopped clock—only "pretty" isn't just the word, either; there wasn't any word, when you come right down to it. And the little girl was simply a peach—a nice, downy, rosy peach; chunky, round-faced, sunny-haired, jolly; with a neat little turned-up nose and big sort of boyish laughing eyes that fairly dared the world.

I made a good half-dozen mistakes when I got in behind the old writing machine again and went on with the letters; but never mind about that. As I began to say, things rocked along until we had about worn the day out, and at the second call to

dinner Mr. Norcross told me to strap up the machine and put the files away in the grips and we'd go eat. Though I was only his stenographer, and a kid at that, he was big enough and Western enough not to let the buck-private-to-officer gap make any difference, and always when we were knocking about together he made me sit at his table.

Sometimes, when it happened that way, he'd ditch the rank-and-file dignities and talk to me as if the thousand miles or so between his job and mine were wiped out. But this Sunday evening he was pretty quiet, breaking out once in the meat course to tell me that he'd just had a forwarded telegram from an old friend of his that would stop us off for a day or two in Portal City, the headquarters of the Pioneer Short Line. Farther along, pretty well into the ice-cream and black coffee, he came to life again to ask me if I had noticed the young lady and the girl in the Pullman section next to ours.

I told him I had, and then, because I had never known him to bother his head for two minutes in succession about any woman, he gave me a shock; said they were ticketed to Portal City—and to find that out he must have asked the train conductor—adding that when we reached Portal it would be the neighborly thing for me to do to help them off with their hand-bags and see that they got a cab if they wanted one.

"Sure I will," says I. "That is, if the lad husband isn't there to meet them."

"What?" he snaps out. "You know her? S is married?"

"No, I don't exactly *know* her," I shuffled. "E she is married, all right."

"How can you tell if you don't know her?" barked; just like that.

I had to make good, right quick, as everybo does who goes up against Mr. Graham Norcro But it so happened that I was able to.

"Her suit case is standing in the aisle, and I s the tag. It has her name, 'Mrs. Sheila Macra on it."

The boss has a way of making two up-and-do wrinkles and a little curved horse-shoe line co between his eyes when he is going to reach for y

"There are times, Jimmie, when you see al gether too much," he said, sort of gruff; and he straight through to the far side of his ice-cre pyramid before he began again.

" 'Macrae,' you say: that is Scotch. And so 'Sheila.' Most likely the names, both of them, only hand-downs. She looks straight American me."

"She is pretty enough to look anything," I th in, just to see how he would take it.

"Right you are, Jimmie," he agreed. "I've

looking at the back of her neck all day. I don't know whether you've ever noticed it—you are only a boy and probably you haven't—but there are so many women who don't measure up to the promises they make when you see 'em from behind. You catch a glimpse of a pretty neck, and when you get around to the face you find out that the neck was only a bit of bluff."

If I had been eating anything in the world but ice-cream I believe it would have choked me. What he said led up to the admission that he had been making these face-and-neck comparisons for goodness knows how long, and I couldn't surround that, all at once. You see, he was such a picture of a man's man in every sense of the word; a fighter and a hard-hitter, right from the jump. And for a man of that sort women are usually no more than fluffy little side-issues, as Eve said when they told her she was made out of Adam's rib.

That ended the dining-car part of it. The sure-enough, knock-out round was fought at the rear end of our Pullman, which happened to be the last car in the train. As we walked back after dinner Mr. Norcross gave me a cigar and said we'd go out to the observation platform to smoke, because the smoking-room was full up with apple-raisers, and sheep-feeders and cattlemen, all talking at once.

As we went down the aisle I noticed that Section

Five was empty, and when we reached the door w found the young lady and the girl standing at th rear railing to watch the track unroll itself unde the trucks and go sliding backwards into the sta light; or at least that was what they seemed to b doing. The young lady was wearing a coat with storm collar, but the girl had a fur thing aroun her neck, and her stocky, chunky little arms wer elbow deep in a big pillow muff to match, thoug the April night wasn't even half-way chilly.

The boss growled out something about waitin until the ladies should go in; and then, for pur safety's sake, he stepped out on the platform t close the side trap door which, with the railing gat on that side, had been left open by a careless rea flagman. Just then the big "Pacific type" that wa pulling us let out a whistle screech that would hav waked the dead, and the air-brakes went on with jerk that showed how beautifully reckless the rai roading was on the Pioneer Short Line.

Mr. Norcross was reaching for the catch on th floor trap and the jerk didn't throw him. But snapped the young woman and the girl away fro the railing so suddenly that the little one had grab for hand-holds; and when she did that, course the big muff went overboard.

At this, a bunch of things happened, all in an wink. The train ground and jiggled to a stop

girl squealed, "Oh, my muff!" and skipped down the steps to disappear in the general direction of the Pacific Coast; the young woman shrieked after her, "Maisie *Ann!*—come back here—you'll be *left!*" and then took her turn at disappearing by the same route; and, on top of it all, the boss jumped off and sprinted after both of them, leaving a string of large, man-sized comments on the foolishness of women as a sex trailing along behind him as he flew.

Right then it was my golden moment to play safe and sane. With three of them off and lost in the gathering night, somebody with at least a grain of sense ought to have stood by to pull the emergency cord if the train should start. But of course I had to take a chance and spill the gravy all over the tablecloth. The stop was at a blind siding in the edge of a mountain desert, and when I squinted up ahead and saw that the engine was taking water, it looked as if there were going to be plenty of time for a bit of a promenade under the stars. So I swung off and went to join the muff hunt.

Amongst them, they had found the pillow thing before I had a chance to horn in. They were coming up the track, and the boss had each of the two by an arm and was telling them that they'd be left to a dead moral certainty if they didn't run. They couldn't run because their skirts were too fashionably narrow, and there were still three or four car-

lengths to go when the tank spout went up with a clang and a clatter of chains and the old "Pacific type" gave a couple of hisses and a snort.

"They're going!" gritted the boss, sort of between his teeth, and without another word he grabbed those two hobbled women folks up under his arms, just as if they'd been a couple of sacks of meal, and broke into a run.

It wasn't a morsel of use, you know. Mr. Norcross stands six feet two in his socks, and I've heard that he was the best all-around athlete in his college bunch. But old Hercules himself couldn't have run very far or very fast with the handicap the boss had taken on, and in less than half a minute the "Pacific type" had caught her stride and the red tail lights of the train were vanishing to pin points in the night. We were like the little tad that went out to the garden to eat worms. Nobody loved us, and we were beautifully and artistically left.

II

A Tank Party

WHEN he saw that it was no manner of use, the boss quit on the handicap race and put his two armfuls down while he still had breath enough left to talk with.

"Well," he said, in his best rusty-hinge rasp, "you've done it! Why, in the name of common sense, couldn't you have let me go back after that muff thing?"

The young woman was panting as if she had been doing the running, and the girl was choking and making a noise that made me think that she was crying. If I had been as well acquainted with her as I got to be a little later on, I would have known that she was only trying to bottle up a laugh that was too beautifully big to be wasted upon just three people and a treeless desert.

It was the young woman who answered the boss.

"I—I didn't stop to think!" she fluttered, taking the blame as if she had been the one to head the procession. "Isn't there *any* way we can stop that train?"

The boss said there wasn't, and I know the only reason why he didn't say a lot of other things was because he was too much of a gentleman to say them in the presence of a couple of women.

"But what shall we do?" the young woman went on, gasping a little. "Isn't there any telegraph station, or—or anything?"

There wasn't. So far as we could see, the surroundings consisted of a short side-track, a spur running off into the hills, and the water tank. The siding switches had no lights, which argued that there wasn't even a pump-man at the tank—as there was not, the tank being filled automatically by a gravity pipe line running back to a natural reservoir in the mountains.

Before the boss had a chance to answer her question about the telegraph office he got his eye on me, and then I knew that he hadn't noticed me before.

"You here, too?" he ripped out, and I know it did him a lot of good to be able to unload on somebody in trousers. "Why in blue blazes didn't you stay on that train and keep it from running away from us?"

That's it: why didn't I? What made the dog stop before he caught the rabbit? I was trying to frame up some sort of an excuse that would sound just a few degrees less than plumb foolish, when the young woman took up for me. She'd had th

clatter of my typewriter dinned into her pretty ears all day, and she knew who I was, even if it was dark.

"Don't take it out on the poor boy!" she said, kind of crisp, and yet sort of motherly. "If you feel obliged to bully some one, I'm the one who is to blame."

"Indeed, you're not!" chipped in the stocky little girl. "*I* was the one who jumped off first. And I don't care: I wasn't going to lose my perfectly good muff."

By this time the boss was beginning to get a little better grip on himself and he laughed.

"We've all earned the leather medal, I guess," he chuckled. "It's done now, and it can't be helped. We're stuck until another train comes along, and perhaps we ought to be thankful that we've got Jimmie Dodds along to chaperon us."

"But isn't there anything else we can do?" said the young woman. "Can't we walk somewhere to where there is a station or a town with people in it?"

I saw Mr. Norcross look down at her skirts and then at the girl's.

"You two couldn't walk very far or very fast in those things you are wearing," he grunted. "Besides, we are in one of the desert strips, and it is probably miles to a night wire station in either direction."

"And how long shall we have to wait for another train?" This time it was the little girl who wanted to know.

"I wish I could tell you, but I can't," said the boss. "I'm not familiar with the Short Line schedules." Then to the young woman: "Shall we go and sit under the water tank? That seems to be about the nearest approach to a waiting-room that the place affords."

We trailed off together up the track, two and two, the boss walking with the young woman. After we'd counted a few of the cross-ties, the girl said: "Is your name Jimmie Dodds?" And when I admitted it: "Mine is Maisie Ann. I'm Sheila's cousin on her mother's side. I think this is a great lark; don't you?"

"I can tell better after it's over," I said. "Maybe we'll have to stay here all night."

"I shouldn't mind," she came back airily. "I haven't been up all night since I was a little kiddie and our house burned down. You're just a boy, aren't you? You must excuse me; it's so dark that I can't see you very well."

I told her I had been shaving for three years and more, and she let out a little gurgling laugh, as though I had said something funny. By that time we had reached the big water tank, and the boss picked out one of the square footing timbers for a

seat. It seemed as if he were finding it a good bit harder to get acquainted with his half of the combination than I was with mine, but after a little the young women thawed out a bit and made him talk —to help pass away the time, I took it—and the little girl and I sat and listened. When the young woman finally got him started, the boss told her all about himself, how he'd been railroading ever since he left college, and a lot of things that I'd never even dreamed of. It's curious how a pretty woman can make a man turn himself inside out that way, just for her amusement.

Maisie Ann and I sat on the end of the timber; not too near to be butt-ins, nor so far away that we couldn't hear all that was said. I still had the cigar the boss had given me, and I sure wanted to smoke mighty bad, only I thought it wouldn't look just right—me being the chaperon. Along in the middle of things, Mr. Norcross broke off short and begged the young woman's pardon for boring her with so much shop talk.

"Oh, you're not boring me at all; I like to hear it," she protested. And then: "You have been telling me the story of a man who has done things, Mr. Norcross. It has been my misfortune to have to associate chiefly with men who only play at doing things."

He switched off at that and asked her if she were

warm enough, saying that if she were not, he and I would scrap up some sage-brush or something and make a fire. She replied that she didn't care for a fire, that the night wasn't at all cold—which it wasn't. Then she showed that she was human, clear down to the tips of her pretty fingers.

"You may smoke if you want to," she told the boss. "I sha'n't mind it in the least."

At that, my little girl turned on me and said, in exactly the same tone: "You may smoke if you want to, Mr. Dodds. I sha'n't mind it in the least." I heard a sort of smothered chuckle from the other end of the timber seat, and the boss lighted his cigar. Then there was more talk, in which it turned out that the young woman and her cousin were to have been met at Portal City by somebody she called "Cousin Basil," but there wouldn't be any scare, because she had written ahead to say that possibly they might stop over with some friends in one of the apple towns.

Then Mr. Norcross said *he* wouldn't miss anything by the drop-out but an appointment he had with an old friend, and he guessed that could wait. I listened, thinking maybe he would mention the name of the friend, and after a while he did. The forwarded Portal City telegram the boss had gotten just before we went to dinner in the dining-car was from "Uncle John" Chadwick, the Chicago wheat

king, and that left me wondering what the mischief Mr. Chadwick was doing away out in the wild and woolly western country where they raise more apples than they do wheat, and more mining stock schemes than they do either.

There was another thing that I listened for, too, but it didn't come. That was some little side mention of the young woman's husband. So far as that under-the-tank talk went, there needn't have been any "Mr. Macrae" at all, and I was puzzled. If she'd been wearing mourning—but she wasn't, so I told myself that she simply couldn't be a widow. Anyway, she was a lot too light-hearted for that.

We had been marooned for nearly an hour when I struck a match and looked at my watch. Mr. Norcross was still doing his best to kill time for the young woman, and he was just in the exciting part of another railroad story, telling about a right-of-way fight on the Midland, where we had to smuggle in a few cases of Winchesters and arm the track-layers to keep from being shut out of the only canyon there was by the P. & S. F., when the little girl grabbed my arm and said: "Listen!"

I did, and broke in promptly. "Excuse me," I called to the other two, "but I think there's a train coming."

The boss cut his story short and we all listened. It seemed that I was wrong. The noise we heard

was more like an auto running with the cut-out open than a train rumbling.

"What do you make it, Jimmie?" came from the boss's end of the timber.

"Motor car. It's out that way," I said, pointing in the darkness toward the east.

My guess was right. In less than a minute we saw the lights of the car, which was turning in a wide circle to come up beside the main line track so it would head back to the east. It stopped a little way below the water tank and about a hundred yards north of the track, or maybe less; anyway, we could see it quite well even when the lamps were switched off and four men came tumbling out of it. If I had been alone on the job I should probably have called to the men as they came tramping over to the side-track. But Mr. Norcross had a different think coming.

"Out of sight—quick, Jimmie!" he whispered, and in another second he had whipped the young woman over the big footing timber to a standing place under the tank among the braces, and I had done the same for the girl.

What followed was as mysterious as a chapter out of an Anna Katherine Green detective story. After doing something to the switch of the unused spur track, the four men separated. One of them went back to the auto, and the other three walked

down the main track to the lower switch of the short siding which was on the same side of the main line as the spur. Here the fourth man rejoined them, and the girl at my elbow told us what he had gone back to the car for.

"He has lighted a red lantern," she whispered. "I saw it when he took it out of the auto."

I guess it was pretty plain to all of us by this time that there was something decidedly crooked on the cards, but if we had known what it was, we couldn't very well have done anything to prevent it. There were only two of us men to their four; and, besides, there wasn't any time. The lantern-carrying man had barely reached the lower switch when we heard the whistle of a locomotive. There was a train coming from the west, and a few seconds later an electric headlight showed up on the long tangent beyond the siding.

It was a bandit hold-up, all right. We saw the four men at the switch stop the train, which seemed to be a special, since it had only the engine and one passenger car. One of the men stood on the track waving the red lantern; we could see him plainly in the glare of the headlight. There wasn't much of a scrap. There were two or three pistol shots, and then, as near as we could make out, the hold-up men, or some of them, climbed into the engine.

What they did next was as blind as a Chinese

puzzle. Before you could count ten they had made a flying switch with the single car, kicking it in on the siding. Before the car had come fully to a stop, the engine was switched in behind it, coupled on, and the reversed train, with the engine pushing the car, rattled away on the old spur that led off into the hills; clattered away and was lost to sight and hearing in less than a minute.

It was not until after the train was switched and gone that we discovered that two of the bandits had been left behind. These two reset the switches for the main track, leaving everything as they had found it, and then crossed over to the auto. Pretty soon we saw match flares, and two little red dots that appeared told us that they were smoking.

"What are they doing, Jimmie?" asked the boss, under his breath.

"They are waiting for the other two to come back," I ventured, taking a chance shot at it. Then I asked him if he knew where the old spur track led to. He said he didn't; that there used to be some bauxite mines back in the hills, somewhere in this vicinity, but he understood they had been worked out and abandoned.

I was just thinking that all this mystery and kidnapping and gun play must be sort of hard on the young woman and the girl, but though my half of the allotment was shivering a little and snuggling

up just a grain closer to me, she proved that she hadn't lost her nerve.

"Did you see the name on that car when the engine went past to get in behind it?" she asked, turning the whispered question loose for anybody to answer.

"No," said the boss; and I hadn't, either.

"I did," she asserted, showing that her eyes, or her wits, were quicker than ours. "I had just one little glimpse of it. The name is 'A-l-e-x-a,' " spelling it out.

Mr. Norcross started as if he had been shot.

"The *Alexa?* That is Mr. Chadwick's private car—they've kidnapped him!" Then he whirled short on me. "Jimmie, are you man enough to go with me and try a tackle on those fellows over there in that auto?"

I said I was; but I didn't add what I thought—that it would probably be a case of double suicide for us two to go up against a pair of armed thugs with our bare hands. The boss would have done it in the hollow half of a minute; he's built just that way. But now the young woman put in her word.

"You mustn't think of doing such a thing!" she protested; and she was still telling him all the different reasons why he mustn't, when we heard the creak and grind of the stolen engine coming back down the old spur.

After that there was nothing to do but to wait and see what was going to happen next. What did happen was as blind as all the rest. The engine was stopped somewhere in the gulch back of us and out of sight from our hiding-place, and pretty soon the two men who had gone with her came hurrying across out of the hill shadows, making straight for the auto. A minute or two later they had climbed into the machine, the motor had sputtered, and the car was gone.

III

Mr. Chadwick's Special

OF course, as soon as the skip-out of the four hold-up men gave us a free hand we knew it was up to us to get busy and do something. It was a safe bet that the *Alexa* was carrying her owner, and in that case Mr. John Chadwick and his train crew were somewhere back in the hills, without an engine, and with a good prospect of staying "put" until somebody should go and hunt them up.

Mr. Norcross had our part in the play figured out before the retreating auto had covered its first mile.

"We've got to find out what they've done with Mr. Chadwick," he broke out. And then: "It can't be very far to where they have left the engine, and if they haven't crippled it—" He stopped short and slung a question at the two women: "Will you two stay here with Jimmie while I go and see what I can find in that gulch?"

They both paid me the compliment of saying that they'd stay with me, but the young woman suggested that it might be just as well if we should all go up the gulch together. So we piked out in the dark,

the boss helping Mrs. Sheila to hobo along over the cross-ties of the spur, and the little girl stumbling on behind with me. She had got over her scare, if she had any, and when I asked her if she didn't want an arm to grab at, she laughed and said, No, and that it was grand; that she wouldn't miss a single stumble for worlds.

"In all my life I've never had anything half as exciting as this happen to me," was the way she put it, and she sure acted as if she meant to make the most of it.

We had followed the spur track up the gulch for maybe a short quarter of a mile when we came to the engine. There was nobody on it, and the brigands had been good-natured enough to leave the fire-door open so that the steam would run down gently and let the boiler cool off by degrees. Luckily for us, the boss was an expert on engines, just as he is on everything else belonging to a railroad, and he struck matches and looked our find over carefully before he tried to move it. As we had feared it might be, the big machine was crippled. There was a key gone out of one of the connecting-rod crank-pin straps; one miserable little piece of steel, maybe eight inches long and tapering one way, and half an inch or so thick the other; but that was a-plenty. We couldn't make a move without it.

I thought we were done for, but Mr. Norcross chased me up into the cab for a lantern. With the light we began to hunt around in the short grass, all four of us down on our hands and knees doing the needle-in-the-haystack stunt. I had been sensible enough to show the little girl the other connecting-rod key, so she knew exactly what to look for, and it did me a heap of good when it turned out that she was the one who found the lost bit of steel.

"I've got it—I've got it!" she cried; and sure enough she had. The hold-up people had merely taken it out and thrown it aside on the extremely probable chance that nobody would be foolish enough to look for it so near at hand, or, looking, would be able to find it in the dark.

It didn't take more than a minute or two, with a wrench from the engineer's box, to put the key back in place. Then, with one to boost and the other to pull, we got our two passengers up into the high cab, and Mr. Norcross made them as comfortable as he could on the fireman's box, showing them how to brace and hang on when the machine should begin to bounce over the rough track of the old spur.

While he was doing this, I threw a few shovelfuls of coal into the firebox and put the blower on; and when we were all set, the boss opened the

throttle and we went carefully nosing ahead over the old track, feeling our way up the gulch and keeping a sharp lookout for the *Alexa* as we ground and squealed around the curves.

It must have been four or five miles back in the hills to the place where we found the private car, and a little way short of it we picked up Mr. Chadwick's conductor, walking the ties to try to get in touch with the civilized world once more. He looked a trifle suspicious when he found the engine in the hands of still another bunch of strangers, and two of them women; but as soon as he heard Mr. Norcross's name he quit being offish and got suddenly respectful. Young as he was for a top-rounder, the boss had a "rep," and I guess there were not very many railroad men west of the Rockies who didn't know him, or know of him.

The conductor told us where we'd find the car, and we found it just as he said we would: pushed in on an old mine-loading track at the end of the spur. The other members of the crew were off and waiting for us; and standing out on the back platform, in the full glare of the headlight as we nosed up for a coupling, there was a big, gray-haired man, bareheaded and dressed in rough-looking old clothes like a mining prospector.

The big man was "Uncle John" Chadwick, and if he was properly astonished at seeing us turn up

with his lost engine, he didn't let it interfere with our welcome when we took our passengers around to the car and lifted them one at a time over the railing and climbed up after them. Mr. Chadwick seemed to know Mrs. Sheila; at any rate, he shook hands with her and called her by name. Then he grabbed for the boss and fairly shouted at him: "Well, well, Graham!—of all the lucky things this side of Mesopotamia! How the dev—how in thunder did you manage to turn up here?" And all that, you know.

The explanations, such as they were, came later, after the young lady, confessing herself a bit excited and fussed up, had taken her cousin under her arm and they had both gone to lie down in one of the staterooms. With the women out of the way, the boss and Mr. Chadwick sat together in the open compartment while the train crew was trundling us back to the main line. Mr. Norcross had put me in right by telling the wheat king who I was, so they didn't pay any attention to me.

As a matter of course, the talk jumped first to the mysterious hold-up and kidnapping and the reason why. All either of them could say didn't serve to throw any light on the mystery, not a single ray. There had been no violence—the pistol shots had been merely meant to scare the trainmen—and there had been no attempt at robbery; for that matter,

Mr. Chadwick hadn't even seen the kidnappers, and hadn't known what was going on until after it was all over.

Mr. Norcross told what we had seen, and how we had come to be where we were able to see it, but that didn't help out much, either. From any point of view it seemed perfectly foolish, and the boss made mention of that. If we hadn't happened to be there to bring the engine back, the worst that could have befallen Mr. Chadwick and the crew of the special would have been a few hours' bother and delay. In the course of time the conductor would have walked out and got to a wire station somewhere, though it might have taken him all night, and then some, to get another engine.

Naturally, Mr. Chadwick was red-hot about it, on general principles. I guess he wasn't used to being kidnapped. But, after all, the thing that bothered him most was the fact that he couldn't account for it.

"I can't help thinking that it is connected with what is due to happen to-morrow morning, Graham," he said, at the end of things. "There are some certain scoundrels in Portal City at the present moment who wouldn't stop at anything to gain their ends, and I am wondering now if Dawes wasn't mixed up in it."

The boss laughed and said:

"You'll have to begin at the beginning with me: I'm too new in this region to know even the names. Who is Dawes?"

"Dawes is a mining man in Portal City, and before I'd been an hour in town yesterday he hunted me up and wanted me to go over to Strathcona to look at some gold prospects he's trying to finance. I said 'No' at first, because I was expecting you, and thought you'd reach Portal City this morning. When you didn't show up, I knew I had twelve hours more on my hands, and as Dawes was still hanging on, I had our trainmaster give me a special over to Strathcona, on a promise that I'd be brought back early this evening, ahead of the 'Flyer' from the west—the train you were on."

Mr. Norcross nodded. "And the promise wasn't kept."

"No promise is ever kept on the Pioneer Short Line," growled the big magnate. And then, with a beautiful disregard for the mixed figures of speech: "Once in a blue moon the chapter of accidents hits the bull's-eye whack in the middle, Graham. When Hardshaw wired me from Portland, I knew you couldn't reach Portal City before this morning, at the very earliest. That was going to cut my time pretty short, with the big gun due to be fired tomorrow morning, and you cut it still shorter by los-

ing twelve hours somewhere along the road—they told me in the despatcher's office that your train was behind a wreck somewhere up in Oregon. But it has turned out all right, in spite of everything. You're here, and we've got the night before us."

Again Mr. Norcross said something about beginning at the beginning. "Just remember that I am entirely in the dark," he went on. "I didn't see Hardshaw at all before leaving Portland; he merely forwarded your wire, asking me to stop over in Portal City, to me on the train—and it was handed to me just before dinner this evening. Of course, that was enough—from anybody who has been as good a friend to me as you have."

"We'll see presently just how far that friendship rope is going to reach," returned the wheat king, and though my back was turned to them, I could easily imagine the quizzical twinkle of the shrewd old eyes that went with it. Then I suppose he nodded toward me, for the boss said:

"Oh, Jimmie's all right; he knew what I had for dinner this evening, and he'll know what I'm going to have for breakfast to-morrow morning."

With the bridle off, the big man went ahead abruptly, cutting out all the frills.

"You finished your building contract on the Oregon Midland, Graham, and after the road was opened for business you refused an offer of the

general managership. Would you mind telling me why you did that?"

"Not in the least. I'm rather burnt out on trying to operate American railroads; at any rate, when it comes to trying to operate one of them for a legitimate profit. There is nothing in it. An operating head is now nothing more than a score-keeper for a national gambling game. The boss gamblers around the railroad post in the Stock Exchange tell him what he has to do and where he has to get off. Stock gambling, under whatever name it masquerades—boosting values, buying and selling margins, reorganizations, with their huge rake-offs for the underwriters—is the incubus which is crushing the life out of the nation's industries, especially in the railroad field. It makes me wish I'd never seen a railroad track."

"Yet it is your trade, isn't it?" asked the wheat king.

"It is; but luckily I can build railroads as well as operate them; and there are other countries besides the United States of America. I'm on my way home to Illinois for a little visit with my mother and sisters; and after that I think I shall close with an offer I've had from one of the Canadian companies."

"Good boy!" chuckled the Chicago magnate. "In due time we might hope to be reading your name in the newspapers—'Sir Graham Norcross, D.S.O.,'

or something of that sort." Then, with a sharp return to the sort of gritting seriousness: "You've been riding over the Pioneer Short Line since early this morning, Graham: what do you think of it?"

I couldn't see the boss's smile, but I could figure it pretty well when he said: "There may be worse managed, worse neglected pieces of railroad track in some of the great transcontinental lines, but if there are I haven't happened to notice them. I suppose it is capitalized to death, like many of the others."

"Fictitious values doubtless have something to do with it at the present stage of the game," Mr. Chadwick admitted. "The Pioneer Short Line is 'under suspicion' on the books of the commissions, both State and Interstate, as a heavily 'watered' corporation—which it is. Do you know the history of the road?"

When I got up to get a match, Mr. Norcross was shaking his head and saying: "Not categorically; no."

"Then I'll brief it for you," said the big man in the stuffed wicker chair. "It has always been a good earning property, being largely, even yet, without much local competition. But from the day it was completed its securities have figured in the market only for their speculative values. The property itself has never been considered, save as

a means to an end; the end being to enable one bunch of the Wall Street gamesters you speak of to make a 'killing' and unload on another bunch."

"The old story," said Mr. Norcross.

"We are bumping over the net result, right now," Mr. Chadwick went on. "The property is bled white; there is no money for betterments; we are tied hand and foot by all sorts of legal restrictions and regulations; and, worse than all, the people we are supposed to serve hate us until you can smell it and taste it in every town and hamlet on the right-of-way."

"So I have heard," put in the boss, calmly.

"That brings us down to the nib of the matter. Pioneer Short Line is practically in the last ditch. The stock has slumped to forty and worse; Shaffer, the general manager and the only able man we have had for years, has resigned in disgust; and if something isn't done to-morrow morning in Portal City, I know of at least one minority stockholder who is going to throw the whole mess into the courts and try for a receivership."

Mr. Norcross looked up quickly.

"Are you the minority stockholder, Uncle John?" he asked, letting himself use the name by which Mr. Chadwick was best known in the wheat pit.

"I am—more's the pity. I had a little lapse of sanity one fine morning a few years ago and bought

in for an investment. I've done everything I could think of, Graham, to persuade Breck Dunton and his Wall Street accomplices to spend just one dollar in ten of their reorganization and recapitalization stealings on the road itself, but it's no good. All they want is to get one more rise out of the securities, so they can unload."

"Is there to be a stockholders' meeting in Portal City to-morrow morning?"

"No; a directors' meeting. Dunton has been making an inspection trip over the system with a dozen or so of his New York cronies. It's a junketing excursion, pure and simple, but while they're here they'll get together and go through the form of picking out a new general manager. I'm on the board and they had to send me notice, though it's an even bet they hoped I'd stay away. In fact, I think they scheduled the meeting out here on the chance that the distance from Chicago would keep me from attending it."

All this talk had taken up a good bit of time, and just as Mr. Chadwick said that about the "even bet," our engineer was whistling for Portal City. From where I was sitting I could see the electric lights dotting the wide valley between the two gateway buttes from which the city gets its name. Mr. Norcross was looking at the lights, too, when he said:

"Are you really going to spring the receivership on the Dunton people to-morrow?"

"I'm going to give Dunton his chance. He can appoint the man I want appointed as general manager, with full power to act, and ratify a little plan I've got up my sleeve for providing a bit of working capital for the road, or—he can turn me down."

"And if he does turn you down?"

"Then, by George, I'll see if I can't persuade the courts to put the property into bankruptcy and install my man as receiver!"

"I don't envy your man his job, either way around; not the least little morsel in the world," said the boss, quietly. And then: "Who is he, Uncle John?"

The wheat king gave a great laugh.

"Don't tell me you haven't guessed it," he chuckled. "You're the man, Graham."

But now Mr. Norcross had something to say for himself, sitting up straight and shaking his head sort of sorrowfully at the big man in the padded chair.

"No you don't, my good old friend; not in a thousand years! You'd lose out in the end, and I'd lose out; and besides, I'm not quite ready to commit suicide." And then to me: "Jimmie, suppose you go and tap on the door and tell the ladies we're pulling into Portal City."

IV

The Tipping of the Scale

AFTER all, it wasn't so very late in the night when our special pulled up to the Portal City station platform and I turned myself into a messenger-boy escort for the lady and the little girl whose muff had been responsible for so many different flip-flaps in the short space of a few hours.

I hadn't hung around while the boss was telling Mrs. Sheila and Maisie Ann good-by. Our conductor had wired ahead from the first telegraph station we came to and had asked to have our dunnage—the two women's, the boss's, and mine—taken out of the "Flyer" Pullman and sent back to Portal City on a local, and I was in the baggage-room, digging up the put-off stuff, at the good-by minute. But I guess they didn't quarrel any—the boss and Mrs. Sheila. She was laughing a little to herself as I helped her down from the car, and when I asked her where she wanted to go, she said I might ask one of the porters to carry the traps, and we'd walk to the hotel, which was only a few blocks up the main street.

She took Maisie Ann on the other side of her and let two of the blocks go by without saying anything more, and then she gave that quiet little laugh again and said, "Your Mr. Norcross amuses me, Jimmie. He says I have no business to travel without a guardian. What do you think about it?"

I told her I hadn't any thinks coming, and she seemed to take that for a joke and laughed some more. Then she asked me if I'd ever been in New York, and I felt sort of small when I had to tell her that I had never been east of Omaha in all my life. With that, she told me not to worry; that if I stayed with Mr. Norcross I'd probably get to go anywhere I wanted to.

Something in the way she said it made it sound like a little slam on the boss, and of course I wasn't going to stand for that.

"There is one thing about it: the boss will make good wherever he goes," I hit back. "You can bet on that."

"I like your loyalty," she flashed out. "It is a fine thing in a day that is much too careless of such qualities. And I agree with you that your Mr. Norcross is likely to succeed; more than likely, if he will only learn to combine a little gentle cleverness with the heavy hand."

There was no doubt about it this time; she *was*

slamming the boss, and I meant to get at the bottom of it, right there and then.

"I don't think you have any cause to blacklist Mr. Norcross," I said. "Hasn't he been right good and brotherly to both of you this evening?"

"Oh, I didn't mean that," she said real earnestly. "But in the stateroom in Mr. Chadwick's car: the ventilator was open, you know, until Maisie Ann got up and shut it, and we couldn't very well help hearing what was said about the kidnapping. Neither Mr. Chadwick nor Mr. Norcross seemed to be able to account for it."

"Can you account for it?" I asked, bluntly enough, I guess.

At this she smiled and said, "It would be rather presumptuous for me to try where Mr. Norcross and Mr. Chadwick failed, wouldn't it? But maybe I can give you just a wee little hint. If you are not well enough acquainted with Mr. Chadwick to ask him yourself, you might tell Mr. Norcross to ask him if there isn't some strong reason why somebody, or perhaps a number of somebodies, wanted to keep him out of Portal City over Sunday night and possibly a part of the Monday."

We were coming to the big electric sign that was winking out the letters to spell "Hotel Bullard," and I was bound to have it out with her before my chance was gone.

"See here," I put in; "you saw something more than I did, and more than Mr. Norcross did. What was it?"

This time she took the motherly tone with me again and told me I must learn not to be rude and masterful, like the boss. Then she gave me what I was reaching for.

"You saw the two men who went over to the auto and smoked while they were waiting for the other two to come back?"

I told her that I hadn't seen them very well; couldn't, with nothing but the starlight to help out.

"Neither did I," she admitted. "But if I am not mistaken, I have seen them many times before, and they are very well known here in Portal City. One of them, the smaller one with the derby hat and the short overcoat, was either Mr. Rufus Hatch or his double; and the other, the heavy-set one, might have been Mr. Gustave Henckel, Mr. Hatch's partner in the Red Tower Company."

This didn't help out much, but you can bet that I made a note of the two names. We were just going into the hotel, so I didn't have a chance to ask any more questions; and after I had paid the porter for lugging the grips, Mrs. Sheila had made whatever arrangement she wanted to with the clerk, and she and Maisie Ann were ready to take the elevator.

"You are going back to Mr. Chadwick's car?" she asked, when she was telling me good-by and thanking me for coming up to the hotel with them.

I told her I was, and then she came around to the kidnapping business again of her own accord.

"You may give Mr. Norcross the hint I gave you, if you wish," she said; "only you must be a good boy, Jimmie, and not drag me into it. I couldn't be positively certain, you know, that the two men were really Mr. Hatch and Mr. Henckel. But if there is any reason why those two wouldn't want Mr. Chadwick to reach the city at the time he was counting on——"

"I see," I nodded; "it just puts the weight of the inference over on that side. I'll tell the boss, when I get a good chance, and you can bet your last dollar he won't tangle you up in it—he isn't put together that way."

"Well, then, good-night," she smiled, giving me her hand. And then: "Mr. Norcross says you'll be going on East to-morrow, and in that case it may be a long time before we meet again. After a while, after he has forgotten all about it, you may tell him from me—" She stopped and gave me that funny little laugh again that made her look so pretty, and said: "No, I guess you needn't, either." And with that she sort of edged the little girl into the elevator before we could get a chance to shake

hands, and I heard her tell the boy to take them up to the mezzanine landing.

Since I didn't have any reason to suppose that the boss was needing me, I took my own time about going back to hunt for Mr. Chadwick's car in the railroad yards, loafing for a while in the Bullard lobby to rubber and look on at the people coming and going. You can tell pretty well how a town stacks up for business if you hit it between ten and eleven o'clock of a Sunday night and hang around its best hotel. If the town is dead, there won't be anybody stirring around the hotel at that hour. But Portal City seemed to be good and alive. There were lots of people knocking about on the sidewalks and drifting in and out of the lobby.

By and by, I went down to the station and began to hunt for the *Alexa*. The yard crew had sidetracked it on a spur down by the freight-house, and when I had stumbled over to it the negro porter remembered me well enough to let me in.

The boss and Mr. Chadwick were facing each other across the table, which was all littered up with papers and maps and reports, and they hardly noticed me when I blew in and sat down a little to one side. I had known well enough, when Mr. Norcross had turned the new offer down, that Mr. Chadwick wasn't going to let it go at that. It seemed that he hadn't; he had got the boss suffi-

ciently interested to go over the papers with him, anyhow.

But just after I broke in, Mr. Norcross jumped up and began to pace back and forth before the table, with his hands in his pockets.

"No, I can't see it, Uncle John," he said, still sort of stubborn and determined. "You are trying to make me believe that I ought to take the biggest job that has ever been set before the expert in any field: to demonstrate, on this rotten corpse of a railroad, the solution of a problem that has the entire country guessing at the present time; namely, the winning of success, and public—and industrial—approval for a carrier corporation which had continuously and persistently broken every commandment in all the decalogues—of business; of fair-dealing with its employees; of common honesty with everybody."

Mr. Chadwick nodded. "That is about the size of it," he said.

"I wouldn't say that it can't be done," the boss went on. "Perhaps it is possible, for the right man. But I'm not the right man. You need somebody who can combine the qualities of a pretty brutal slugger with those of a fine-haired, all-things-to-all-men, diplomatic peacemaker. I can do the slugging; I've proved it a time or two in the past. But I'm no good at the other end of the game. When

it comes to handling the fellow with a 'pull,' I've either got to smash him or quit."

At that Mr. Chadwick nodded again and said: "That is one of the reasons why I have reached out and picked you for the job. There will be a good bit of the slugging needed, at first, and I guess you can acquire the other things as you go along, can't you?"

"Not at this late day, I'm afraid. People who know me best call me a scrapper, and I've been living up to my reputation. Yesterday, when we were held up behind the freight wreck at Widner, I got off to see what we were in for. The conductor of our train had spotted me from seeing my pass, and I happened to hear him docketing me for the wrecking boss. He said I was known on the Midland as 'Hell-and-repeat' Norcross; that it was a habit with me to have a man for breakfast every morning."

"I can add a little something to that," Mr. Chadwick put in, quizzically. "Lepaige, your Oregon Midland president, says you need humanizing, and wonders why you haven't married some good woman who would knock the rough corners off. Why haven't you, Graham?"

The boss gave a short laugh. "Too busy," he said. "Past that, we might assume that the good woman hasn't presented herself. Let it go. The facts still stand. I am too heavy-handed for this

job of yours. I should probably mix up with some of these grafters you've been telling me about and get a knife in my back. That would be all in the day's work, of course, but it would leave you right where you are now. And as for this other thing—the industrial side of it: that's a large order; a whaling big order. I'm not even prepared to say, off-hand, that it's the right thing to do."

"Right or wrong, it's a thing that is coming, Graham," was the sober reply. "If we don't meet it half-way—well, the time will come when we of the hiring-and-firing side won't be given any option in the matter. You may call it Utopian if you please, and add that I'm growing old and losing my grip. But that doesn't obliterate the fact that the days of the present master-and-man relations in the industries are numbered."

The boss shook his head. "As I say, I can't go that far with you, off-hand; and if I could, I should still doubt that I am the man to head your procession."

I thought that settled it, but that was because I didn't know Mr. Chadwick very well. The big wheat king just smiled up at the boss, sort of fatherly, and said:

"We'll let it rest until morning and give you a chance to sleep on it. You have spoken only of the difficulties and the responsibilities, Graham; but

there is another side to it. In a way, it's an opportunity, carrying with it the promise of the biggest kind of a reward."

"I don't see it," said the boss, briefly.

"Don't you? I do. I have an idea rambling around in my head that it is about time some bright young fellow was demonstrating that problem you speak of—showing the people of the United States that a railroad needn't be regarded as an outlaw among the industries; needn't have the enmity of everybody it serves; needn't be the prey of a lot of disloyal and dissatisfied employees who are interested only in the figure of the pay-day check; needn't be shot at as a wolf with a bounty on its scalp. Let it rest at that for the present. Get your hat and we'll walk up-town to the hotel. I want to have a word with Dunton to-night, if I can shake him loose from his junketing bunch long enough to listen to it. Beyond that, I want to get hold of the sheriff and put him on the track of those hold-ups."

Here was a chance for me to butt in with the hint Mrs. Sheila had given me, but I didn't see how I was going to do it without giving her away. So I said the little end of nothing, just as hard as I could; and when we got out of the car, Mr. Norcross told me to go by the station and have our luggage sent to the hotel, and that killed whatever chance I might have had farther along.

It was some time after eleven o'clock when I got around to the hotel with the traps. The stir in the lobby had quieted down to make it seem a little more like Sunday night, but an automobile party had just come in, and some of the men were jawing at the clerk because the house wasn't serving a midnight theater supper in the café on the Sunday.

Mr. Chadwick had disappeared, but I saw the boss at the counter waiting for his chance at the clerk. The quarrelsome people melted away at last, all but one—a young swell who would have been handsome if he hadn't had the eyes of a maniac and a color that was sort of corpse-like with the pallor of a booze-fighter. He had his hat on the back of his head, and he was ripping it off at the clerk like a drunken hobo.

His ravings were so cluttered up with cuss-words that I couldn't get any more than the drift of them, but it seemed that he had caught a glimpse of somebody he knew—a woman, I took it, because he said "she"—looking down from the rail of the mezzanine, and he wanted to go up to her. And it appeared that the clerk had told the elevator man not to take him up in his present condition.

The boss was growing sort of impatient; I could tell it by the way the little side muscles on his jaw were working. When he got the ear of the clerk for a second or so between cusses, he asked what

was the matter with the lunatic. I caught only broken bits of the clerk's half-whisper: "Young Collingwood . . . President Dunton's nephew . . . saw lady . . . mezzanine . . . wants to go up to her."

The boss scowled at the young fellow, who was now handing himself around the corner of the counter to get at the clerk again, and said: "Why don't you ring for an officer and have him run in?"

The night clerk was evidently scared of his job. "I wouldn't dare to do that," he chittered. "He's one of the New York crowd—the railroad people —President Dunton's nephew—guest of the house."

The young fellow had pulled himself around to our side of the counter by this time and was hooking his arm to make a pass at Mr. Norcross, trimming things up as he came with a lot more language. The boss said, right short and sharp, to the clerk, "Get his room key and give it to a boy who can show me the way," and the next thing we knew he had bashed that lunatic square in the face and was cuffing him along to the nearest elevator.

I guess it sort of surprised the clerk, and everybody else who happened to see it—but not me. It was just like the boss. He came back in a few minutes, looking as cool as a cucumber.

"What did you do with him?" asked the clerk, kind of awed and half scared.

"Got a couple of the corridor sweepers to put him in a bath and turn the cold water on him. That'll take the whiskey out of him. Now, if you have a minute to spare, I'd like to get my assignment."

We hadn't more than got our rooms marked off for us when I saw Mr. Chadwick coming across from the farther of the three elevators. He was smiling sort of grim, as if he'd made a killing of some sort with Mr. Dunton, and instead of heading back for his car he took the boss over to a corner of the lobby and sat down to smoke with him.

I circled around for a while, and after a bit Mr. Norcross held up a finger at me to bring him a match. They didn't seem to be talking anything private, so I sat down just beyond them, so sleepy that I could hardly see straight. Mr. Chadwick was telling about his early experiences in Portal City, how he blew in first on top of the Strathcona gold boom, and how he had known mighty near everybody in the region in those days.

While he was talking, a taxi drove up and one of the old residenters came in from the street and crossed to the elevators; a mighty handsome, stately old gentleman, with fierce white mustaches and a goatee, and "Southern Colonel" written all over him.

"There's one of them now; Major Basil Ken-

drick—Kentucky born and raised, as you might guess," Mr. Chadwick was saying. "Old-school Southern 'quality,' and as fine as they make 'em. He is a lawyer, but not in active practice: owns a mine or two in Strathcona Gulch, and is neither too rich nor too poor."

I grabbed at the name, "Basil," right away: it isn't such a very common name, and Mrs. Sheila had said something—under the water tank, you recollect—about a "Cousin Basil" who was to have met her at the train. I was putting two or three little private guesses of my own together, when one of the elevators came down and here came our two, the young lady and the chunky little girl, with the major chuckling and smiling and giving an arm to each. They had apparently stopped at the Bullard only to wait until he could come after them and take them home. Mrs. Sheila was looking just as pretty as ever, only now there wasn't a bit of color in her face, and her eyes seemed a good deal brighter, some way.

"Yes, indeed; the major is all right; as you'd find out for yourself if you'd make up your mind to stay in Portal City and get acquainted with him," Mr. Chadwick was going on; and by that time the major and the two pretty ones had come on to where the boss and Mr. Chadwick could see them.

I saw the boss sit up in his chair and stare at

them. Then he said: "That's Mrs. Macrae with him now. Is she a member of his family?"

"A second cousin, or something of that sort," said Mr. Chadwick. "I met her once at the major's house out in the northern suburb last summer, and that's how I came to know her when you put her aboard of the *Alexa* back yonder in the gulch."

Mr. Norcross let the three of them get out and away, and we heard their taxi speed up and trundle off before he said, "She is married, I'm told. Where is her husband?"

Mr. Chadwick looked up as if he'd already forgotten the three who had just crossed the lobby.

"Who—Sheila Macrae? Yes, she has been married. But there isn't any husband—she's a widow."

For quite a while the boss sat staring at his cigar in a way he has when he is thinking right hard, and Mr. Chadwick let him alone, being busy, I guess, with his own little scrap that lay just ahead of him in the coming directors' meeting. Then, all of a sudden, the boss got up and shoved his hands into his coat pockets.

"I've changed my mind, Uncle John," he said, looking sort of absent-like out of the window to where the major's taxi had been standing. "If you can pull me into that deal to-morrow morning—with an absolutely free hand to do as I think best, mind you—I'll take the job."

V

The Directors' Meeting

I WAS up bright and early the next morning—that is, a good bit brighter and earlier than Mr. Norcross was—and after breakfast I took a little sashay down Nevada Avenue to have a look at *our* railroad. Of course, I knew, after what the boss had said to Mr. Chadwick the night before, just before we went to bed, that we weren't ever going to see Canada, or even Illinois.

I'll have to admit that the look I got didn't make me feel as if we'd found a Cullinan diamond. Down in the yards everything seemed to be at the loosest kind of loose ends. A switching crew was making up a freight, and the way they slammed the boxes together, regardless of broken drawheads and the like, was a sin and a shame. Then I saw some grain cars with the ends started and the wheat running out all along the track, and three or four more with the air hose hanging so it knocked along on the ties, and a lot of things like that—and nobody caring a hoot.

There was a big repair shop on the other side of the yard tracks, and though it was after seven o'clock, the men were still straggling over to go to work. Down at the round-house, a wiper was spotting a big freight-puller on the turn-table, and I'm blessed if he didn't actually run her forward pair of truck-wheels off the edge of the table, right while I was looking on, just as if it were all in the day's work.

In the course of time I drifted back to the office headquarters, which were at the end of the passenger station and in a part of the same building, downstairs and up. A few clerks were dribbling in, and none of them seemed to have life enough to get out of the way of an ox-team. One fellow recognized me for a member of the big railroad family, I guess, for he stopped and asked me if I was looking for a job.

I told him I wasn't, and gave him a cigar—just on general principles. He took it, and right away he began to loosen up.

"If you should change your mind about the job, you just make it a case of 'move on, Joey,' and don't stay here and try to hit this agglomeration," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"It's a frost. I'm off of the Pennsy myself, and I'm ashamed to look in the looking-glass since I came out here. The P. S. L. isn't a railroad, at

all; it's just making a bluff at being one. Besides, we're slated to have a new general manager, and if he's any good he'll fire the last living man of us."

"Maybe, if I change my mind, I might get a job with the new man," I said. "Who is he?"

"Search me! I don't believe they've found anybody yet. The big people from New York are all here now, and maybe they'll pick somebody before they go away. If I had the nerve of a rabbit, I'd take the next train back for Pittsburgh."

"What's your job?" I quizzed.

He grinned at me sort of good-naturedly. "You wouldn't think it to look at me, but I'm head stenographer in the general super's office."

"You haven't got much of a boss, if he can't command any more loyalty than you are giving him," I offered; and at that he spat on the platform and made a face like a kid that had been taking a dose of asafœtida.

"Yah!" he snorted. "We haven't a man in the outfit, on any job where the pay amounts to anything, that isn't somebody's cousin or nephew or brother-in-law or something. They shoot 'em out here from New York in bunches. You may be a spotter, for all I know, but I don't care a hang. I'm quitting at the end of the month, anyhow—if I don't get fired this side of that."

I grinned; I couldn't help it.

"Tell me," I broke in, "are there many more like you in the Pioneer Short Line service?"

"Scads of 'em," he retorted cheerfully. "I can round you up a couple of dozen fellows right here at headquarters who would go on a bat and paint this town a bright vermilion if the new G. M., whoever he is going to be, would clean out the whole rookery, cousins, nephews, and all."

"I think I'll have to take your name," I told him, fishing out a pencil and a note-book—just to see what he would do.

"Huh! so you *are* a spotter, after all, are you? All right, Mr. Spotter. My name's May, Frederic G. May. And when you want my head, you can find it just exactly where I told you—in the general super's office. You're a stranger and you took me in. So long."

Wouldn't that jar you? A man out of the general offices talking that way about his road and his own boss? I couldn't help seeing how rotten the thing must be if it smelled that way to the men on its own pay-rolls.

After a while, after I'd loafed through the shops and around the yard and got a few more whiffs of the decay, I strolled on back to the hotel. Seen by daylight, Portal City seemed to be a right bright little burg, with a cut-stone post-office and a new court house built out of pink lava, and three or

four office buildings big enough to be called sky-scrapers anywhere outside of a real city like Portland or Seattle. The streets were paved, and on the main one, Nevada Avenue, there was plenty of business. Also, I tipped off a mining exchange and two pretty nice-looking club-houses right in sight from the Bullard entrance.

There wasn't much of a crowd in the lobby, and as I didn't see anything of Mr. Norcross or Mr. Chadwick, I sat down in a corner to wear out some more time. Though it was now after nine o'clock, there were still a good many people breakfasting in the café, the entrance to which was only a few feet away from my corner.

I was wondering a little what had become of the boss—who was generally the earliest riser on the job—when two men came bulging through the screen doors of the café, picking their teeth and feeling in their pockets for cigars. Right on the dot, and in the face of knowing that it couldn't reasonably be so, I had a feeling that I'd seen those men before. One of them was short and rather stocky, and his face had a sort of hard, hungry look; and the other was big and barrel-bodied. The short one was clean-shaven, but the other had a reddish-gray beard clipped close on his fat jaws and trimmed to a point at the chin.

After they had lighted up they came along and

sat down three or four chairs away from me. They paid no attention to me, but for fear they might, I tried to look as sleepy as an all-night bell-hop in a busy hotel.

"The Dunton bunch got together in one of the committee rooms up-stairs a little after eight o'clock," said the short man, in a low, rasping voice that went through you like a buzz-saw, and it was evident that he was merely going on with a talk which had been begun over the breakfast-table. "Thanks to those infernal blunderers Clanahan sent us last night, Chadwick was with them."

"I think that was choost so," said the big man, speaking slowly and with something more than a hint of a German accent. "Beckler was choost what you call him—a tam blunderer."

Like a flash it came over me that I was "listening in" to a talk between the same two men who had sat in the auto at Sand Creek Siding and smoked while they were waiting for the actual kidnappers to return. You can bet high that I made myself mighty small and unobtrusive.

After a while the big man spoke again.

"What has Uncle Chon Chadwick up his sleeve got, do you think?"

"I don't think—I know!" was the snappy reply. "It's one of two things: a receivership—which will knock us into a cocked hat because we can't fool

with an officer of the United States court—or a new deal all around in the management."

"Vich of the two will it be that will come out of that commiddee room up-stairs?"

"A new management. Dunton can't stand for a receivership, and Chadwick knows it. Apart from the fact that a court officer would turn up a lot of side deals that wouldn't look well for the New York crowd if they got into the newspapers, the securities would be knocked out and the majority holders—Dunton and his bunch—couldn't unload. Chadwick has got him by the neck and can dictate his own terms."

"Vich will be?"

"That he will name the man who is to take Shaffer's place as general manager of the railroad outfit. We might have stood it off for a while, just as I said yesterday, if we could have kept Chadwick from attending this meeting."

"But now we don't could stand it off—what then?"

"We'll have to wait and see, and size up the new man when he blows in. He'll be only human, Henckel. And if we get right down to it we can pull him over to our side—or make him wish he'd never been born."

The big man got up ponderously and brushed the cigar ashes off of his bay-window. "You vait and

see what comes mit the commiddee-room out. I go up to the ovvice."

When I was left alone in the row of lobby chairs with the snappy one I was scared stiff for fear, now that he didn't have anything else to think of, he'd catch on to the fact that I might have overheard. But apart from giving me one long stare that made my blood run cold, he didn't seem to notice me much, and after a little he got up and went to sit on the other side of the big rotunda where he could watch the elevators going and coming.

I guess he had lots of patience, for I had to have. It was after eleven o'clock, and I had been sitting in my corner for two full hours, when I saw the boss coming down the broad marble stair with Mr. Chadwick. I don't think the Hatch man saw them, or, if he did, he didn't let on.

Mr. Norcross held up a finger for me, and when I jumped up he gave me a sheet of paper; a Pioneer Short Line president's letter-head with a few lines written on it with a pen and a sort of crazy-looking signature under them.

"Take that to the *Mountaineer* job office and have five hundred of them printed," was the boss's order. "Tell the foreman it's a rush job and we want it to-day. Then make a copy and take it to Mr. Cantrell, the editor, and ask him to run it in to-morrow's paper as an item of news, if he feels

like it. When you are through, come down to Mr. Chadwick's car."

Since the thing was going to be published, and I was going to make a copy of it, I didn't scruple to read it as I hurried out to begin a hunt for the *Mountaineer* office. It was the printer's copy for an official circular, dated at Portal City and addressed to all officers and employees of the Pioneer Short Line. It read:

"Effective at once, Mr. Graham Norcross is appointed General Manager of the Pioneer Short Line System, with headquarters at Portal City, and his orders will be respected accordingly.

"BRECKENRIDGE DUNTON,
"*President.*"

We had got our jolt, all right; and leaving the ladder and the Friday start out of the question, I grinned and told myself that the one other thing that counted for most was the fact that Mrs. Sheila Macrae was a widow.

VI

The *Alexa* Goes East

I CHASED like the dickens on the printing job, because, apart from wanting to absorb all the dope I could as I went along on the new job, I knew I would be needed every minute right at Mr. Norcross's elbow, now that the actual work was beginning.

He and Mr. Chadwick were deep in reports and figures and plans of all sorts when I got back to the *Alexa*. Luncheon was served in the car, and they kept the business talk going like a house afire while they were eating, the hurry being that Mr. Chadwick wanted to start back for Chicago the minute he could find out if our connecting line east would run him special.

I could tell by the way the boss's eyes were snapping that he was soaking up the details at the rate of a mile a minute; not that he could go much deeper than the totals into anything, of course, in such a gallop, but these were enough to give him his hand-holds. At two o'clock a boy came down from the headquarters with a wire saying that the

private car could go east as a special at two-thirty, if Mr. Chadwick were ready; and he put his O.K. on the message and sent it back.

"Now for a few unofficial things, Graham, and we'll call it a go," he said, after the boy had gone. "You are to have an absolutely free hand, not only in the management and the operating, but also in dictating the policy of the company. What you say goes as it lies, and Dunton has promised me that there shall be no appeal, not even to him."

"I imagine he didn't say that willingly," the boss put in, which was the first intimation I had had that he wasn't present at the directors' meeting in the Bullard.

"No, indeed; nothing was done willingly. I had to swing the big stick and swing it hard. But I had them where they couldn't wiggle. They had to swallow you whole or take the consequences—and the consequences were going to cost them money. Dunton got down when he had to, and he pulled the others into line. You are to set your own pace, and you are to have some money for betterments. I offered to float a new loan on short-time notes with the Chicago banks, and the board authorized it."

The boss pushed that part of it aside abruptly, as he always does when he has got hold of the gist of a thing.

"Now, about my staff," he said. "It's open gossip all over the West that the P. S. L. is officered by a lot of dummies and place-hunters and relatives. I'll have to clean house."

"Go to it; that is a part of your 'free hand.' Have you the material to draw from?"

"I know a few good men, if I can get them," said the boss thoughtfully. "There is Upton Van Britt; he was the only millionaire in my college, and he is simply a born operating chief. If I can persuade him to store his autos and lay up his yacht and sell off his polo ponies—I'll try it, anyhow. Then there is Charlie Hornack, who is the best all-around traffic man this side of the Missouri—only his present employers don't seem to have discovered it. I can get Hornack. The one man I can't place at sight is a good corporation counsel. I'm obliged to have a good lawyer, Uncle John."

"I have the man for you, if you'll take him on my say so; a young fellow named Ripley who has done some corking good work for me in Chicago. I'll wire him, if you like. Now a word or two about this local graft we touched upon last night. I don't know the ins and outs of it, but people here will tell you that a sort of holding corporation, called Red Tower Consolidated, has a strangle grip on this entire region. Its subsidiary companies control the grain elevators, the fruit packeries, the

coal mines and distributing yards, the timber supply and the lumber yards, and even have a finger on the so-called independent smelters."

The boss nodded. "I've heard of Red Tower. Also, I have heard that the railroad stands in with it to pinch the producers and consumers."

A road engine was backing down the spur to take the *Alexa* in tow for the eastward run, and what was said had to be said in a hurry.

"Dig it out," barked the wheat king. "If you find that we are in on it, it's your privilege to cut loose. The two men who will give you the most trouble are right here in Portal City: Hatch, the president of Red Tower, and Henckel, its vice-president. They say either of them would commit murder for a ten-dollar bill, and they stand in with Pete Clanahan, the city boss, and his gang of political thugs. That's all, Graham; all but one thing. Write me after you've climbed into the saddle and have found out just what you're in for. If you say you can make it go, I'll back you, if it takes half of next year's wheat crop."

A minute or so later the boss and I stood out in the yard and watched the *Alexa* roll away toward the sunrise country, and perhaps we both felt a little bit lonesome, just for a second or two. At least, I know I did. But when the special had become a black smudge of coal smoke in the distance, Mr.

Norcross turned on me with the grim little smile that goes with his fighting mood.

"You are private secretary to the new general manager of the Pioneer Short Line, Jimmie, and your salary begins to-day," he said, briskly. "Now let's go up to the hotel and get our fighting clothes on."

VII

"Heads Off, Gentlemen!"

GOSH all Friday—say! but the next few days did see a tear-up to beat the band on the old Short Line! With the printing of his appointment circular, Mr. Norcross took the offices in the headquarters building lately vacated by Mr. Shaffer, and it was something awful to see the way the heads went into the basket. One by one he called the Duntonites in; the traffic manager, the general superintendent, the roadmaster, the master-mechanic —clear on down to the round-house foreman and the division heads.

Some few of them were allowed to take the oath of allegiance and stay, but the place-fillers and pay-roll parasites, the cousins and the nephews and the brothers-in-law, every last man of them had to walk under the axe. One instance will be enough to show how it went. Van Burgh, great-great-grandnephew of some Revolutionary big-wig and our figurehead general superintendent, was the first man called in, and Mr. Norcross shot him dead in half a minute.

"Mr. Van Burgh, what railroad experience did you have before you came to the P. S. L.?" was the first bullet.

Mr. Van Burgh, a heavy-faced, youngish man with sort of world-tired eyes, looked at his fingernails.

"I was in the president's office in New York for a time after I left Harvard," he drawled, a good deal as if the question bored him.

"And how long have you been here?"

"I came out lawst October."

"H'm; only six months' actual experience, eh? I'm sorry, but you can't learn operative railroading at the expense of this management on the Pioneer Short Line. Your resignation, to take effect at once, will be accepted. Good-day."

Van Burgh turned red in the face, but he had his nerve.

"You're an entirely new kind of a brute," he remarked calmly. "I was appointed by President Dunton, and I don't resign until he tells me to."

"Then you're fired!" snapped the boss, whirling his chair back to his desk. And that was all there was to it.

Three days later, when the whole town was talking about the new "Jack, the ripper," as they called him, Kirgan, who had been our head machinery man on the Midland construction, tumbled in in answer

to a wire. Mr. Norcross slammed him into place ten minutes after he hit the town.

"Your office is across the tracks, Kirgan," he told him. "I've begun the house-cleaning over there by firing your predecessor and three or four of his pet foremen. Get in the hole and dig to the bottom. You have a lot of soreheads to handle, here and at the division shops, and it isn't all their fault, not by a long shot. I'll give you six months in which to make good as a model superintendent of motive power. Get busy."

"That's me," said Kirgan, who knew the boss up one side and down the other. "You give me the engines, and I'll keep 'em out of the shop." And with that he went across the yard and took hold, before he had even hunted up a place to sleep in.

Mr. Van Britt was the next man to show up. He was fine; a square-built, stocky little gentleman who looked as if he's always had the world by the ear and never meant to let go. Though it was a time when most men went clean-shaven, he wore a stubby little mustache, closely clipped, and while his jaw looked as if he could bite a nail in two, he had a pair of twinkling, good-natured eyes that sort of took the edge off the hard jaw.

"Well, I'm here," he said, dropping into a chair and sitting with his legs wide apart. And then,

ignoring me as if I hadn't been there: "Graham, what the devil have you got against me, that you should drag me out here on the edge of nowhere and make me go to work for a living?"

The boss just grinned at him and said: "It's for the good of your soul, Upton. You've too much money. Your office is up at the end of the corridor and your chair is empty and waiting for you. Your appointment circular has already been mailed out."

Mr. Hornack was the last of the new office staff to fall in, though he didn't have nearly as far to come as some of the others. He was red-headed and wore glasses. They used to say of him on the Overland Central that he fired his chief clerk regularly twice a week, and then hired him over again, which was merely a roundabout way of saying that he had a sort of meat-axe temper to go with his red hair. But they also used to say that he could make business grow where none ever grew before, and that's what a traffic man lives for.

When the new staff was made up, Mr. Norcross gathered all the department heads together in his office and laid down the lines of the new policy. He put it in just eight words: "Clean house, and make friends for the company." Then he gave them a little talk on the conditions as he had found them, and told them that he wanted all these conditions reversed. It was a large order, and both Mr.

Van Britt and Mr. Hornack said as much, but the boss said it had to go just that way. There would be a little money for betterments, but it must be spent as if every dollar were ten.

Naturally, the big turn-over brought all sorts of disturbances at the send-off. Some of the relieved cousins and nephews stayed in town and jumped in to stir up trouble for the new management. The *Herald*, which was the other morning paper, took up for the down-and-outs, and there wasn't anything too mean for it to say about the boss and his new appointees. Then the employees got busy and the grievance committees began to pour in. Mr. Norcross never denied himself to anybody. The office-door stood wide open and the kickers were welcomed, as you might say, with open arms.

"You men are going to get the squarest deal you have ever had, and a still squarer one a little farther along, if you will only stay on the job and keep your clothes on," was the way the boss went at the trainmen's committee. "We are out to make the P. S. L. the best line for service, and the best company to work for, this side of the Missouri River. I want your loyalty; the loyalty of every man in the service. I'll go further and say that the new management will stand if you and the other pay-roll men stand by it in good faith, or it will fall if you don't."

"You'll meet the grievance committees and talk things over with them when there's a kick coming?" said old Tom McClure, the passenger conductor who was acting as spokesman.

"Sure I will—every time. More than that, I'll take a leaf out of Colonel Goethal's book and keep open house here in this office every Sunday morning. Any man in the service who thinks he has a grievance may come here and state it, and if he has a case, he'll get justice."

Naturally, a few little talks like this, face to face with the men themselves, soon began to put new life into the rank and file. Mr. Norcross's old pet name of "Hell-and-repeat" had followed him down from Oregon, as it was bound to, but now it began to be used in the sense that most railroad men use the phrase, "The Old Man," in speaking of a big boss that they like.

This winning of the service *esprit de corps*—if that's the word—commenced to show results right away. The first time Mr. Norcross's special went over the line anybody could see with half an eye that the pay-roll men were taking a brace. Trains were running on better time, there was less slamming and more civility, and at one place we actually found a section foreman going along and picking up the spikes and bolts and fish-plates that the wasters ahead of him had strewn all along the right-of-way.

"Heads Off, Gentlemen!"

There was so much crowded into these first few weeks that I've forgotten half of it. The work we did, pulling and hauling things into shape, was a fright, and my end of the job got so big that the boss had to give me help. Following out his own policy, he let me pick my man, and after I'd had a little talk with Mr. Van Britt, I picked May, the young fellow who had been so disgusted with his job under Van Burgh. Frederic of Pittsburgh was all right; a little too tonguey, perhaps, but a worker from away back, and that was what we were looking for.

Out of this frantic hustle to get things started and moving right, anybody could have pulled a couple of conclusions that stuck up higher than any of the rest. The boss and Mr. Van Britt were steadily winning the rank and file over to something like loyalty on the one hand, and on the other, wherever we went, we found the people who were paying the freight a solid unit against us, hating us like blazes and entirely unwilling to believe that any good thing could come out of the Nazareth of the Pioneer Short Line.

This hatred manifested itself in a million different ways, and all of them saw-toothed. On that first trip over the line I heard a Lesterburg banker tell the boss, flat-footed, that the country at large would never believe that any measure of reform

undertaken by the Dunton management would be accepted as sincere.

"You talk like an honest man, Mr. Norcross," he said, and he was saying it right in the boss's own private car, too, mind you, "but this region has suffered too long and too bitterly under Wall Street methods to be won over now by a little shoulder-patting in the way of better train schedules and things of that sort. You'll have to dig a good bit deeper, and that you won't be allowed to do."

The boss just smiled at this, and offered the banker man a cigar—which he took.

"When the time comes, Mr. Bigelow, I'm going to show you that I can dig as deep as the next fellow. Where shall I begin?"

The banker laughed. "If you had a spade with a handle a mile long you might begin on the Red Tower people," he suggested. "But, of course, you can't do that: your New York people won't let you. There is the real nib of the thing, Mr. Norcross. What we need is a railroad line that will stick to its own proper business—the carrying of freight and passengers. What we have is a gigantic holding corporation which fathers every extortionate side-issue that can pay it a royalty!"

"Excuse me," said the boss, still as pleasant as a basket of chips, "that may be what you have had in the past; we won't try to go behind the returns.

But it is not what you have now. From this time on, the Short Line proposes to be just what you said it should be—a carrier corporation, pure and simple."

"Do you mean to say that you are going to cut loose from Hatch and Henckel and their thousand-and-one robber subsidiary companies?" demanded the banker.

At this the boss stood up and looked the big banker gentleman squarely in the eye.

"Mr. Bigelow, at the present moment I represent Pioneer Short Line, in management and in its policy, as it stands to-day. I can assure you emphatically that the railroad management has nothing whatever to do with Red Tower Consolidated or any of its subsidiaries."

"Then you've broken with Hatch?"

"No; simply because there hasn't been anything to break, so far as I am concerned."

The banker man dropped into the nearest chair.

"But, man alive! you can't stay here if you don't pull with the Hatch crowd," he exclaimed; and then: "Somebody ought to have tipped you off beforehand and not let you come here to commit suicide!"

After that they went out together; up-town to Mr. Bigelow's bank, I guess, and as they pushed the corridor door open I heard the banker say:

"You don't know what you are up against, Mr. Norcross. That outfit will get you, one way or another, as sure as the devil's a hog. If it can't break you, it will hire a gang of gunmen—I wouldn't put it an inch beyond Rufus Hatch; not a single inch."

There it was again; but as he went out the boss was laughing easily and saying that he was raised in a gun country, and that the fear of a fight was the least of his troubles at the present moment.

VIII

With the Strings Off

AS soon as we returned from the inspection trip, the boss pulled off his coat—figuratively speaking—and rolled up his sleeves. It wasn't his way to talk much about what he was going to do: he'd jump in and do it first, and then talk about it afterward—if anybody insisted on knowing the reason why.

Mr. Van Britt was given swift orders to fill up his engineering staff and get busy laying new steel, building new bridges and modernizing the permanent way generally. Mr. Hornack was told to put on an extra office force to ransack the traffic records and make reports showing the fairness or unfairness of existing tariffs and rates, and a widespread invitation was given to shippers to come in and air their grievances—which you bet they did!

Sandwiched in between, there were long private conferences with Mr. Ripley, the bright young lawyer Mr. Chadwick had sent us from Chicago, and with a young fellow named Juneman, an ex-newspaper man who was on the pay-rolls as "Advertising

Manager," but whose real business seemed to be to keep the Short Line public fully and accurately informed of everything that most railroad companies try to keep to themselves.

The next innovation that came along was another young Chicago man named Billoughby, and *his* title on the pay-roll was "Special Agent." What he did to earn his salary was the one thing that Juneman didn't publish broadcast in the newspapers; it was kept so dark that not a line of it got into the office records, and even I, who was as close to the boss as anybody in our outfit, never once suspected the true nature of Billoughby's job until the day he came in to make his final report—and Mr. Norcross let him make it without sending me out on an errand.

"Well, I think I'm ready to talk Johnson, now," was the way Billoughby began. "I've been into all the deals and side deals, and I've had it out with Ripley on the legal points involved. Red Tower is the one outfit we'll have to kill off and put out of business. Under one name or another, it is engineering every graft in this country; it is even backing the fake mining boom at Saw Horse—to which, by the way, this railroad company is now building a branch line."

Mr. Norcross turned to me:

"Jimmie, make a note to tell Mr. Van Britt to have the work stopped at once on the Saw Horse

branch, and all the equipment brought in." And then to Billoughby: "Go on."

"The main graft, of course, is in the grain elevators, the fruit packeries, the coal and lumber yards and the stock yards and handling corrals. In these public, or *quasi*-public, utilities Red Tower has everybody else shut out, because the railroad has given them—in fee simple, it seems—all the yard room, switches, track facilities, and the like. Wherever local competition has tried to break in, the railroad company has given it the cold shoulder and it has been either forced out or frozen out."

"Exactly," said the boss. "Now tell me how far you have gone in the other field."

"We are pretty well shaped up and are about ready to begin business. Juneman has done splendid work, and so has Ripley. Public sentiment is still incredulous, of course. It's mighty hard to make people believe that we are in earnest; that we have actually gone over to their side in the fight. They're all from Missouri, and they want to be shown."

"Naturally," said Mr. Norcross.

"We have succeeded, in a measure, though the opposition has been keeping up a steady bombardment. Hatch and his people haven't been idle. They have a strong commercial organization and a stout pull with the machine element, or rather the

gang element, in politics. They own or control a dozen or more prominent newspapers in the State, and, as you know, they are making an open fight on you and your management through these papers. The net result so far has been merely to keep the people stirred up and doubtful. They know they can't trust Hatch and his crowd, and they're afraid they can't trust you. They say that the railroad has never played fair—and I guess it hasn't, in the past."

"Not within a thousand miles," was the boss's curt comment. "But go on with your story."

"We pulled the new deal off yesterday, simultaneously in eleven of the principal towns along the line. Meetings of the bankers and local capitalists were held, and we had a man at each one of them to explain our plan and to pledge the backing of the railroad. Notwithstanding all the doubt and dust that's been kicked up by the Hatch people, it went like wild-fire."

"With money?" queried the boss.

"Yes; with real money. Citizens' Storage & Warehouse was launched, as you might say, on the spot, and enough capital was subscribed to make it a going concern. Of course, there were some doubters, and some few greedy ones. The doubters wanted to know how much of the stock was going to be held by officials of the railroad company, and

it was pretty hard to convince them that no Short Line official would be allowed to participate, directly or indirectly."

"And the greedy ones?"

"They kicked on that part of the plan which provides for the local apportionment of the stock to cover the local needs of each town only; they wanted more than their share. Also, they protested against the fixed dividend scheme; they didn't see why the new company shouldn't be allowed to cut a melon now and then if it should be fortunate enough to grow one."

Mr. Norcross smiled. "That is precisely what the Hatch people have been doing, all along, and it is the chief grievance of these same people who now want a chance to outbid their neighbors. The lease condition was fully explained to them, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yes; Ripley saw to that, and copies of the lease were in the exhibits. The new company is to have railroad ground to build on, and ample track facilities in perpetuity, conditioned strictly upon the limited dividend. If the dividend is increased, the leases terminate automatically."

The boss drew a long breath.

"You've done well, and better than well, Billoughby," he said. "Now we are ready to fire the blast. How was the proposal to take over the Red Tower properties at a fair valuation received?"

"There was some opposition. Lesterburg, and three of the other larger towns, want to build their own plants. They are bitter enough to want to smash the big monopoly, root and branch. But they agreed to abide by a majority vote of the stock on that point, and my wire reports this morning say that a lump-sum offer will be made for the Red Tower plants to-day."

Mr. Norcross sat back in his chair and blew a cloud of cigar smoke toward the ceiling.

"Hatch won't sell," he predicted. "He'll be up here before night with blood in his eye. I'm rather glad it has come down to the actual give and take. I don't play the waiting game very successfully, Billoughby. Keep in touch, and keep me in touch. And tell Ripley to keep on pushing on the reins. The sooner we get at it, the sooner it will be over."

After Billoughby had gone, Mr. Norcross dictated a swift bunch of letters and telegrams and had me turn my shorthand notes over to Fred May for transcription. With the desk cleaned up he came at me on a little matter that had been allowed to sleep ever since the day, now some time back, when I had given him Mrs. Sheila's hint about the identity of the two men who had sat and smoked in the auto that Sunday night at Sand Creek Siding, and about the talk between the same two that I had overheard the following morning.

"We are going to have sharp trouble with a gentleman by the name of Hatch before very long, Jimmie," was the way he began. "I don't want to hit him below the belt, if I can help it; but on the other hand, it's just as well to be able to give the punch if it is needed. You remember what you told me about that Monday morning talk between Hatch and Henckel in the Bullard lobby. Would you be willing to go into court as a witness and swear to what you heard?"

"Sure I would," I said.

"All right. I may have to pull that little incident on Mr. Hatch before I get through with him. The train hold-up was a criminal act, and you are the witness who can convict the pair of them. Of course, we'll leave Mrs. Macrae and the little girl entirely out of it. Nobody knows that they were there with us, and nobody need know."

I agreed to that, and this mention of Mrs. Sheila and Maisie Ann makes me remember that I've been leaving them out pretty severely for a good long while. They weren't left out in reality—not by a jugful. In spite of all the rush and hustle, the boss had found time to get acquainted with Major Basil Kendrick and had been made at home in the transplanted Kentucky mansion in the northern suburb. I'd been there too, sometimes to carry a box of flowers when the boss was suddenly called out of town,

and some other evenings when I had to go and hunt him up to give him a bunch of telegrams. Of course, I didn't play the butt-in; I didn't have to. Maisie Ann usually looked out for me, and when she found out that I liked pumpkin pie, made Kentucky fashion, we used to spend most of those errand-running evenings together in the pantry.

But to get back on the firing line. I wasn't around when Mr. Norcross had his "declaration of war" talk with Hatch. Mr. Norcross, being pretty sure he wasn't going to have that evening off, had sent me out to "Kenwood" with a note and a box of roses, and when I got back to the office about eight o'clock, Hatch was just going away. I met him on the stair.

The boss was sitting back in his big swing chair, smoking, when I broke in. He looked as if he'd been mixing it up good and plenty with Mr. Rufus Hatch—and enjoying it.

"We've got 'em going, Jimmie," he chuckled; and he said it without asking me how I had found Mrs. Sheila, or how she was looking, or anything.

I told him I had met Mr. Hatch on the stair going down.

"He didn't say anything to you, did he?" he asked.

"Not a word."

"I had to pull that Sand Creek business on him, and I'm rather sorry," he went on. "He and his people are going to fight the new company to

a finish, and he merely came up here to tell me so—and to add that I might as well resign first as last, because, in the end, he'd get my goat. When I laughed at him he got abusive. He's an ugly beggar, Jimmie."

"That's what everybody says of him."

"It's true. He and his crowd have plenty of money—stolen money, a good deal of it—and they stand in with every political boss and gangster in the State. There is only one way to handle such a man, and that is without gloves. I told him we had the goods on him in the matter of Mr. Chadwick's kidnapping adventure. At first he said I couldn't prove it. Then he broke out cursing and let your name slip. I hadn't mentioned you at all, and so he gave himself away. He knows who you are, and he remembered that you had overheard his talk with Henckel in the Bullard lobby."

I heard what he was saying, but I didn't really sense it because my head was ram jam full of a thing that was so pitiful that it had kept me swallowing hard all the way back from Major Kendrick's. It was this way. When I had jiggled the bell out at the house it was Maisie Ann who let me in and took the box of flowers and the boss's note. She told me that Aunt Mandy, the cook, hadn't made any pie that day, so we sat in the dimly lighted hall and talked for a few minutes.

One thing she told me was that Mrs. Sheila had company and the name of it was Mr. Van Britt. That wasn't strictly news because I had known that Mr. Van Britt was dividing time pretty evenly with the boss in the Major Kendrick house visits. That wasn't anything to be scared up about. I knew that all Mr. Norcross asked, or would need, would be a fair field and no favor. But my chunky little girl didn't stop at that.

"I think we can let Mr. Van Britt take care of himself," she said. "He has known Cousin Sheila for a long time, and I guess they are only just good friends. But there is something you ought to know, Jimmie—for Mr. Norcross's sake. He has been sending lots of flowers and things, and Cousin Sheila has been taking them because—well, I guess it's just because she doesn't know how not to take them."

"Go on," I said, but my mouth had suddenly grown dry.

"Such things—flowers, you know—don't mean anything in New York, where we've been living. Men send them to their women friends just as they pass their cigar-cases around among their men friends. But I'm afraid it's different with Mr. Norcross."

"It is different," I said.

Then she told me the thing that made me swell up and want to burst.

"It mustn't be different, Jimmie. Cousin Sheila's married, you know."

"I know she has been married," I corrected; and then she gave me the sure-enough knock-out.

"She is married now, and her husband is still living."

For a little while I couldn't do anything but gape like a chicken with the pip. It was simply fierce! I knew, as well as I knew anything, that the boss was gone on Mrs. Sheila; that he had fallen in love, first with the back of her neck and then with her pretty face and then with all of her; and that the one big reason why he had let Mr. Chadwick persuade him to stay in Portal City was the fact that he had wanted to be near her and to show her how he could make a perfectly good spoon out of the spoiled horn of the Pioneer Short Line.

When I began to get my grip back a little I was right warm under the collar.

"She oughtn't to be going around telling people she is a widow!" I blurted out.

"She doesn't," was the calm reply. "People just take it for granted, and it saves a lot of talk and explanations that it wouldn't be pleasant to have to make. They've separated, you know—years ago, and Cousin Sheila has taken her mother's maiden name, Macrae. If we were going to live here always it would be different. But we are only visiting

Cousin Basil, or I suppose we are, though we've been here now for nearly a year."

There wasn't much more to be said, and pretty soon I had staggered off with my load and gone back to the office. And this was why I couldn't get very deep into the Hatch business with Mr. Norcross when he told me what he had been obliged to do about the Sand Creek hold-up.

He didn't say anything further about it, except to tell me to be careful and not let any of the Hatch people tangle me up so that my evidence, if I should have to give it, would be made to look like a faked-up story; and a little before nine o'clock Mr. Ripley dropped in and he and the boss went up-town together.

I might have gone, too. Fred May had got through and gone home, and there was nothing much that I could do beyond filing a few letters and tidying up a bit around my own desk. But I couldn't make up my mind either to work or to go to bed. I wanted a chance to think over the horrible thing Maisie Ann had told me; time to cook up some scheme by which the boss could be let down easy.

If he had been like other men it wouldn't have been so hard. But I had a feeling that he had gone into this love business just as he did into everything—neck or nothing—burning his bridges behind him, and having no notion of ever turning back. I had

once heard our Oregon Midland president, Mr. Lepaige, say that it was not good for a man always to succeed; never to be beaten; that without a setback, now and then, a man never learned how to bend without breaking. The boss had never been beaten, and Mr. Lepaige was talking about him when he said this. What was it going to do to him when he learned the truth about Mrs. Sheila?

On top of this came the still harder knock when I saw that it was up to me to tell him. I remembered all the stories I'd ever heard about how the most cold-blooded surgeon that ever lived wouldn't trust himself to stick a knife into a member of his own family, and I knew now just how the surgeon felt about it. It was up to me to whet my old Barlow and stick it into the boss, clear up to the handle.

While I was still sweating under the big load Maisie Ann had dumped upon me, the night despatcher's boy came in with a message. It was from Mr. Chadwick, and I read it with my eyes bugging out. This is what it said:

"To G. Norcross, G. M.,
"Portal City.

"P. S. L. Common dropped to thirty-four today, and banks lending on short time notes for betterment fund are getting nervous. Wire from New York says bondholders are stirring and talking re-

ceivership. General opinion in financial circles leans to idea that new policy is foregone failure. Are you still sure you can make it win?

"CHADWICK."

Right on the heels of this, and before I could get my breath, in came the boy again with another telegram. It was a hot wire from President Dunton, one of a series that he had been shooting in ever since Mr. Norcross had taken hold and begun firing the cousins and nephews.

"To G. NORCROSS, G. M.,
"Portal City. RUSH.

"See stock quotations for to-day. Your policy is a failure. Am advised you are now fighting Red Tower. Stop it immediately and assure Mr. Hatch that we are friendly, as we have always been. If something cannot be done to lift securities to better figure, your resignation will be in order.

"DUNTON."

They say that misfortunes never come singly. Here were two new griefs hurling themselves in over the wires all in the same quarter-hour, besides the one I had up my sleeve. But there was no use dallying. It was up to me to find the boss as quickly as I could and have the three-cornered surgical operation

over with. I knew the telegrams wouldn't kill him—or I thought they wouldn't. I thought they'd probably make him take a fresh strangle hold on things and be fired—if he had to be fired—fighting it out grimly on his own line. But I wasn't so sure about the Mrs. Sheila business. That was a horse of another color.

I had just reached for my hat and was getting ready to snap the electrics off when I heard footsteps in the outer office. At first I thought it was the despatcher's boy coming with another wire, but when I looked up, a stocky, hard-faced man in a derby hat and a short overcoat was standing in the doorway and scowling across at me.

It was Mr. Rufus Hatch, and I had a notion that the hot end of his black cigar glared at me like a baleful red eye when he came in and sat down.

IX

'And Satan Came 'Also

"I SAW your office lights from the street," was the way the Red Tower president began on me, and his voice took me straight back to the Oregon woods and a lumber camp where the saw-filers were at work. "Where is Mr. Norcross?"

I told him that Mr. Norcross was up-town, and that I didn't suppose he would come back to the office again that night, now that it was so late. Instead of going away and giving it up, he sat right still, boring me with his little gray eyes and shifting the black cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"My name is Hatch, of the Red Tower Company," he grated, after a minute or two. "You're the one they call Dodds, aren't you?"

I admitted it, and he went on.

"Norcross brought you here with him from the West, didn't he?"

I nodded and wondered what was coming next. When it did come it nearly bowled me over.

"What pay are you getting here?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to cuss him out right there and then and tell him it was none of his

business. But the second thought (which isn't always as good as it's said to be) whispered to me to lead him on and see how far he would go. So I told him the figures of my pay check.

"I'm needing another shorthand man, and I can afford to pay a good bit more than that," he growled. "They tell me you are well up at the top in your trade. Are you open to an offer?"

I let him have it straight then. "Not from you," I said.

"And why not from me?"

Here was where I made my first bad break. All of a sudden I got so angry at the thought that he was actually trying to buy me that I couldn't see anything but red, and I blurted out, "Because I don't hire out to work for any strong-arm outfit—not if I know it!"

For a little while he sat blinking at me from under his bushy eyebrows, and his hard mouth was drawn into a straight line with a mean little wrinkle coming and going at the corners of it.

When he got ready to speak again he said, "You're only a boy. You want to get on in the world, don't you?"

"Supposing I do: what then?" I snapped.

"I'm offering you a good chance: the best you ever had. You don't owe Norcross anything more than your job, do you?"

"Maybe not."

"That's better. Put on your hat and come along with me. I want to show you what I can do for you in a better field than railroading ever was, or ever will be. It'll pay you—" and he named a figure that very nearly made me fall dead out of my chair.

Of course, it was all plain enough. The boss had him on the hip with that kidnapping business, with me for a witness. And he was trying to fix the witness. It's funny, but the only thing I thought of, just then, was the necessity of covering up the part that Mrs. Sheila and Maisie Ann had had in the hold-up affair that he was so anxious to bury and put out of sight.

"I guess we needn't beat about the bushes any longer, Mr. Hatch," I said, bracing up to him. "I haven't told the sheriff, or anybody but Mr. Norcross, what I know about a certain little train hold-up that happened a few weeks ago down at Sand Creek Siding; but that isn't saying that I'm not going to."

At this he flung the stump of the black cigar out of the window, found another in his pocket, and lighted it. If I had had the sense of a field mouse, I might have known that I was no match for such a man; but I lacked the sense—lacked it good and hard.

"You're like your boss," he said shortly. "You'd go a long distance out of your way to make an enemy when there is no need of it. That hold-up business

was a joke, from start to finish. I don't know how you and Norcross came to get in on it; the joke was meant to be on John Chadwick. The night before, at a little dinner we were giving him at the railroad club, he said there never was a railroad hold-up that couldn't have been stood off. A few of us got together afterward and put up a job on him; sent him over to Strathcona and arranged to have him held up on the way back."

Again I lost my grip on all the common, every-day sanities. My best play—the only reasonable play—was to let him go away thinking that he had made me swallow the joke story whole. But I didn't have sense enough to do that.

"Mr. Chadwick didn't take it as a joke!" I retorted.

"I know he didn't; and that's why we're all anxious now to dig a hole and bury the thing decently. Perhaps we had all been taking a drop too much at the club dinner that night."

At that I swelled up man-size and kicked the whole kettle of fat into the fire.

"Of course, it was a joke!" I ripped out. "And your coming here to-night to try to hire me away from Mr. Norcross is another. The woods are full of good shorthand men, Mr. Hatch, but for the present I think I shall stay right where I am—where a court subpœna can find me when I'm wanted."

"That's all nonsense, and you know it—if you're not too much of a kid to know anything," he snapped, shooting out his heavy jaw at me. "I merely wanted to give you a chance to get rid of the railroad collar, if you felt like it. And there'll be no court and no subpœna. The poorest jack-leg lawyer we've got in Portal City would make a fool of you in five minutes on the witness-stand. Nevertheless, my offer holds good. I like a fighting man; and you've got nerve. Take a night and sleep on it. Maybe you'll think differently in the morning."

Here was another chance for me to get off with a whole skin, but by this time I was completely lost to any sober weighing and measuring of the possible consequences. Leaning across the desk end I gave him a final shot, just as he was getting up to go.

"Listen, Mr. Hatch," I said. "You haven't fooled me for a single minute. Your guess is right; I heard every word that passed between you and Mr. Henckel that Monday morning in the Bullard lobby. As I say, I haven't told anybody yet but Mr. Norcross; but if you go to making trouble for him and the railroad company, I'll go into court and swear to what I know!"

He was half-way out of the door when I got through, and he never made any sign that he heard what I said. After he was gone I began to sense, just a little, how big a fool I had made of myself. But

I was still mad clear through at the idea that he had taken me for the other kind of a fool—the kind that wouldn't know enough to be sure that the president of a big corporation wouldn't get down to tampering with a common clerk unless there was some big thing to be stood off by it.

Stewing and sizzling over it, I puttered around with the papers on my desk for quite a little while before I remembered the two telegrams, and the fact that I'd have to go and stick the three-bladed knife into Mr. Norcross. When I did remember, I shoved the messages into my pocket, flicked off the lights and started to go up-town and hunt for the boss.

After closing the outer door of the office I don't recall anything particular except that I felt my way down the headquarters stair in the dark and groped across the lower hall to the outside door that served for the stair-case entrance from the street. When I had felt around and found the brass knob, something happened, I didn't know just what. In the tiny little fraction of a second that I had left, as you might say, between the hearse and the grave, I had a vague notion that the door was falling over on me and mashing me flat; and after that, everything went blank.

X

The Big Smash

WHEN I came to life out of what seemed like an endless succession of bad dreams it was broad daylight and the sun was shining brightly through some filmy kind of curtain stuff in a big window that looked out toward the west. I was in bed, the room was strange, and my right hand was wrapped up in a lot of cotton and bandaged.

I hadn't more than made the first restless move before I saw a sort of pie-faced woman in a nurse's cap and apron start to get up from where she was sitting by the window. Before she could come over to the bed, somebody opened a door and tip-toed in ahead of nursey. I had to blink hard two or three times before I could really make up my mind that the tip-toer was Maisie Ann. She looked as if she might be the nurse's understudy. She had a nifty little lace cap on her thick mop of hair, and I guess her apron was meant to be nursey too, only it was frilled and tucked to a fare-you-well.

I don't know whether or not I've mentioned it before, but she was always an awfully wholesome,

jolly little girl, with a laugh so near the surface that it never took much of anything to make it come rippling up through. But now she was as sober as a deacon—and about fourteen times as pretty as I had ever seen her before.

"You poor, poor boy!" she cooed, patting my pillow just like my grandmother used to when I was a little kid and had the mumps or the measles. "Are you still roaming around in the Oregon woods?"

That brought my dream, or one of them, back; the one about wandering around in a forest of Douglas fir and having to jump and dodge to keep the big trees from falling on me and smashing me.

"No more woods for mine," I said, sort of feebly. And then: "Where am I?"

"You are in bed in the spare room at Cousin Basil's. They wanted to take you to the railroad hospital that night, but when they telephoned up here to try to find Mr. Norcross, Cousin Basil went right down and brought you home with him in the ambulance."

" 'That night,' you say?" I parroted. "It was last night that the door fell on me, wasn't it?"

"I don't know anything about a door, but the night that they found you all burnt and crippled, lying at the foot of your office stairs, was three days ago. You have been out of your head nearly all the time ever since."

"Burnt and crippled? What happened to me, Maisie Ann?"

"Nobody knows; not even the doctors. We've been hoping that some day you'd be able to tell us. Can't you tell me now, Jimmie?"

I told her all there was to tell, mumbling around among the words the best I could. When she saw how hard it was for me to talk, I could have sworn that I saw tears in the big, wide-open eyes, but maybe I didn't.

Then she told me how the headquarters watchman had found me about midnight; with my right hand scorched black and the rest of me apparently dead and ready to be buried. The ambulance surgeon had insisted, and was still insisting, that I had been handling a live wire; but there were no wires at all in the lower hall, and nothing stronger than an incandescent light current in the entire office building.

"And you say I've been here hanging on by my eyelashes for three days? What has been going on in all that time, Maisie Ann? Hasn't anybody been here to see me?"

She gave a little nod. "Everybody, nearly. Mr. Van Britt has been up every day, and sometimes twice a day. He has been awfully anxious for you to come alive."

"But Mr. Norcross?" I queried. "Hasn't he been up?"

She shook her head and turned her face away, and she was looking straight out of the window at the setting sun when she asked, "When was the last time you saw Mr. Norcross, Jimmie?"

I choked a little over a big scare that seemed to rush up out of the bed-clothes to smother me. But I made out to answer her question, telling her how Mr. Norcross had left the office maybe half an hour or so before I did, that night, going up-town with Mr. Ripley. Then I asked her why she wanted to know.

"Because nobody has seen him since a little later that same night," she said, saying it very softly and without turning her head. And then: "Mr. Van Britt found a letter from Mr. Norcross on his desk the next morning. It was just a little typewritten note, on a Hotel Bullard letter sheet, saying that he had made up his mind that the Pioneer Short Line wasn't worth fighting for, and that he was resigning and taking the midnight train for the East."

I sat straight up in bed; I should have had to do it if both arms had been burnt to a crisp clear to the shoulders.

"Resigned?—gave up and ran away? I don't believe that for a single minute, Maisie Ann!" I burst out.

She was shaking her head again, still without turning her face so that I could see it.

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"I—I'm afraid it's all true, Jimmie. There were two telegrams that came to Mr. Norcross the night he went away; one from Mr. Chadwick and the other from Mr. Dunton. I heard Mr. Van Britt telling Cousin Sheila what the messages were. He'd seen the copies of them that they keep in the telegraph office."

It was on my tongue's end to say that Mr. Norcross never had seen those two telegrams, because I had them in my pocket and was on my way to deliver them when I got shot; but I didn't. Instead, I said: "And you think that was why Mr. Norcross threw up his hands and ran away?"

"No; I don't think anything of the sort. *I* know what it was, and you know what it was," and at that she turned around and pushed me gently down among the pillows.

"What was it?" I whispered, more than half afraid that I was going to hear a confirmation of my own breath-taking conviction. And I heard it, all right.

"It was what I was telling you about, that same evening, you remember—down in the hall when you brought the flowers for Cousin Sheila? You told him what I told you, didn't you?"

"No; I didn't have a chance—not any real chance."

"Then somebody else told him, Jimmie; and that

is the reason he has resigned and gone away. Mr. Van Britt thinks it was on account of the two messages from Mr. Chadwick and Mr. Dunton, and that is why he wants to talk to you about it. But you know, and I know, Jimmie, dear; and for Cousin Sheila's sake and Mr. Norcross's, we must never lisp it to a human soul. A new general manager has been appointed, and he is on his way out here from New York. Everything has gone to pieces on the railroad, and all of Mr. Norcross's friends are getting ready to resign. Isn't it perfectly heart-breaking?"

It was; it was so heart-breaking that I just gasped once or twice and went off the hooks again, with Maisie Ann's frightened little shriek ringing in my ears as she tried to hold me back from slipping over the edge.

XI

What Every Man Knows

I WASN'T gone very long on this second excursion into the woozy-woozies, though it was nighttime, and the shaded electric light was turned on when I opened my eyes and found Mrs. Sheila sitting by the bedside. The pie-faced nurse was gone; or at least I didn't see her anywhere; and the change in Mrs. Sheila sort of made me gasp. She wasn't any less pretty as she sat there with her hands clasped in her lap, but she was different; sober, and with the laugh all gone out of the big gray eyes, and a look in them as if she had suddenly become so wise that nobody could ever fool her.

"You are feeling better now?" she asked, when she found me staring at her.

I told her I guessed I was, but that my hand hurt me some.

"You have had a great shock of some kind—besides the burn, Jimmie," she rejoined, folding up the bed covers so that the bandaged hand would rest easier. "The doctors are all puzzled. Does your head feel quite clear now—so that you can think?"

"It feels as if I had a crazy clock in it," I said.

"But the thinking part is all right. Have you heard anything from Mr. Norcross yet?"

"Not a word. It is all very mysterious and perplexing. We have been hoping that you could tell us something when you should recover sufficiently to talk. Can't you, Jimmie?"

Remembering what Maisie Ann had told me just before I went off the hooks, I thought I might tell her a lot if I dared to. But that wouldn't do. So I just said:

"I told Maisie Ann all I knew about Mr. Norcross. He left the office some little time before I did—with Mr. Ripley. I didn't know where they were going."

"They went to the hotel," she helped out. "Mr. Ripley says they sat in the lobby until after ten o'clock, and then Mr. Norcross went up to his rooms."

Of course, I knew that Mr. Ripley knew all about the Hatch ruction; but if he hadn't told her, I wasn't going to tell her. She had got ahead of me, there, though; perhaps she had been talking with the major, who always knew everything that was going on.

"There was some trouble in connection with Mr. Hatch that evening, wasn't there?" she asked.

"Hatch had some trouble—yes. But I guess the boss didn't have any," I replied.

"Tell me about it," she commanded; and I told her just as little as I could; how Hatch had had an interview with the boss earlier in the evening, while I was away.

"It wasn't a quarrel?" she suggested.

"Why should they quarrel?" I asked.

She shook her head. "You are sparring with me, Jimmie, in some mistaken idea of being loyal to Mr. Norcross. You needn't, you know. Mr. Norcross has told me all about his plans; he has even been generous enough to say that I helped him make them. That is why I can not understand why he should do as he has done—or at least as everybody believes he has done."

I saw how it was. She was trying to find some explanation that would clear the boss, and perhaps implicate the Hatch crowd. I couldn't tell her the real reason why he had run away. Maisie Ann had been right as right about that; we must keep it to our two selves. But I tried to let her down easy.

"Mr. Van Britt has told you about those two telegrams that came after Mr. Norcross left the office," I said, still covering up the fact that the telegrams hadn't been delivered—that they were probably in the pocket of my coat right now, wherever that was. "They were enough to make any man throw up his hands and quit, *I* should say."

"No," she insisted, looking me straight in the

eyes. "You are not telling the truth now, Jimmie. You know Mr. Norcross better than any of us, and you know that it isn't the least little bit like him to walk out and leave everything to go to wreck. Have you ever known of his doing anything like that before?"

I had to admit that I hadn't; that, on the other hand, it was the very thing you'd least expect him to do. But at the same time I had to hang on to my sham belief that it was the thing he *had* done: either that, or tell her the truth.

"Every man reaches his limit, some time!" I protested. "What was Mr. Norcross to do, I'd like to know; with Mr. Chadwick getting scared out, and Mr. Dunton threatening to fire him?"

"The thing he wouldn't do would be to go off and leave all of his friends, Mr. Van Britt and Mr. Hornack, and all the rest, to fight it out alone. You know that as well as I do, Jimmie Dodds!"

There was actually a flash of fire in the pretty gray eyes when she said that, and her loyal defense of the boss made me love her good and hard. I wished, clear to the bottom of my heart, that I dared tell her just why it was that Mr. Norcross had thrown up his hands and dropped out, but that was out of the question.

"If you won't take my theory, you must have one of your own," I said; not knowing what else to say.

"I have," she flashed back, "and I want you to hurry and get well so that you can help me trace it out."

"Me?" I queried.

"Yes, you. The others are all so stupid! even Mr. Van Britt and Mr. Ripley. They insist that Mr. Norcross went east to see and talk with Mr. Chadwick. They have found out that Mr. Chadwick left Chicago the day after he sent that telegram, to go up into the Canadian woods to look at some mines, or something. They say that Mr. Norcross has followed him, and that is why they don't hear anything from him."

"What do *you* think?" I asked.

She didn't answer right away, and in the little pause I saw a sort of frightened look come into her eyes. But all she said was, "I want you to hurry up and get well, Jimmie, so you can help."

"I'm well enough now, if they'll let me get up."

"Not to-night; to-morrow, maybe." Then: "Mr. Van Britt is down-stairs with Cousin Basil. He has been very anxious to talk with you as soon as you were able to talk. May I send him up?"

Of course I said yes; and pretty soon after she went away, our one and only millionaire came in. He looked as he always did; just as if he had that minute stepped out of a Turkish bath where they shave and scrub and polish a man till he shines.

"How are you, Jimmie?" he rapped out. "Glad to see you on earth again. Feeling a little more fit, to-night?"

I told him I didn't think it would take more than half a dozen fellows of my size to knock me out, but I was gaining. Then he sat down and put me on the question rack. I gave him all I had—except that thing about the undelivered telegrams and two or three others that I couldn't give him or anybody, and at the end of it he said:

"I've been hoping you could help out. I don't need to tell you that this new turn things have taken has us all fought to a standstill, Jimmie. I've known 'the boss', as you call him, ever since we were boys together, and I never knew him to do anything like this before."

"We're in pretty bad shape, aren't we?" I suggested.

"We couldn't be in worse shape," was the way he put it. Then he told me a little more than Maisie Ann had; how President Dunton had wired to stop all the betterment work on the Short Line until the new general manager could get on the ground; how the local capitalists at the head of the new Citizens' Storage & Warehouse organization were scared plumb out of their shoes and were afraid to make a move; and how the newspapers all over the State were saying that it was just what they had ex-

pected—that the railroad was crooked in root and branch, and that a good man couldn't stay with it long enough to get his breath.

"Then the new general manager has been appointed?" I asked.

He nodded. "Some fellow by the name of Dismuke. I don't know him, and neither does Hornack. He is on his way west now, they say."

"And there is no word from Mr. Chadwick?"

"Nothing direct. His secretary wires that he is somewhere up north of Lake Superior, in the Canadian mining country and out of reach of the telegraph."

"Mr. Norcross hasn't shown up at Mr. Chadwick's Chicago offices?" I ventured.

"No. The telegraph people have been wiring everywhere and can't get any trace of him."

"Tell them to try Galesburg. That's where his people live."

"I know," he said; and he made a note of the address on the back of an envelope. Then he came at me again, on the "direct," as a lawyer would say.

"You've been closer to Norcross in an intimate way than any of us, Jimmie: haven't you seen or heard something that would help to turn a little more light on this damnable blow-up?"

I hadn't—outside of the one thing I couldn't talk about—and I told him so, and at this he let me see

a little more of what was going on in his own mind.

"You're one of us, in a way, Jimmie, and I can talk freely to you. I'm new to this neck of woods, but the major tells me that the Hatch crowd is a pretty tough proposition. Mrs. Macrae goes farther and insists that there has been foul play of some sort. You say you weren't present when Hatch called on Norcross at the office that night?"

"No; I came in just after Hatch went away."

"Did Norcross say anything to make you think there had been a fight?"

"He told me that Hatch was abusive and had made threats—in a business way."

"In a business way? What do you mean by that?"

I quoted the boss's own words, as nearly as I could recall them.

"So Hatch did make a threat, then? He said that Norcross might as well resign one time as another?"

"Something like that, yes."

"Can you add anything more?"

I could, but I didn't want to. Mr. Van Britt didn't know anything about the Sand Creek Siding hold-up, or I supposed he didn't, and I didn't want to be the first one to tell him. Besides, the whole business was beside the mark. Maisie Ann knew, and I knew, that the boss, strong and unbreakable as he was in other ways, had simply thrown up his

hands and quit because somebody had told him that Mrs. Sheila had a husband living. So I just said:

"Nothing that would help out," and after he had talked a little while longer our only millionaire went down-stairs again.

It's funny how things change around for a person just by giving them time to sort of shake down into place and fit themselves together. Nobody came up any more that night; not even the pie-faced nurse; and I had a good chance to lie there looking up at the ceiling pattern of the wall paper and thinking things out to a finish.

After a while the thin edge of the wedge that Mrs. Sheila had been trying to drive into me began to take hold, just a little, in spite of what I knew—or thought I knew. Was it barely possible, after all, that there had been foul play of some sort? There were plenty of mysteries to give the possibility standing-room.

In the first place, something had been done to me by somebody: it was a sure thing that I hadn't crippled and half-killed myself all by my lonesome. Then they had said that the boss stayed up with Mr. Ripley that night until after ten o'clock, and had then gone up to go to bed. That being the case, how could anybody have got to him between that time and the leaving time of the midnight Fast Mail to tell him about Mrs. Sheila?

Anyway it was stacked up, it made a three-cornered puzzle, needing somebody to tackle it right away; and when I finally went to sleep it was with the notion that, sick or no sick, I was going to turn out early in the morning and get busy.

XII

With the Wheels Trigged

I WAS well enough to get up the next morning, and when I phoned to Mr. Van Britt he sent his car out to the major's to take me down to the office. Just before I left the house, Mrs. Sheila waylaid me, and after telling me that I must be careful and not take cold in the burnt hand, she put in another word about the boss's disappearance.

"I want you to remember what I said last night, Jimmie, and not let the others talk you over into the belief that Mr. Norcross has gone away because he was either discouraged or afraid. He wouldn't do that: you know it, and I know it. We are his friends, you and I, and we must stand by him and defend him when he isn't here to defend himself."

It did me good to hear her talk that way, and I wondered if she could be the same young woman who had jumped off the train to run skittering after Maisie Ann, and had afterward made the boss turn himself inside out under the water tank just for her pastime. It didn't seem possible; she seemed so

many worlds older and wiser. I had been sort of getting ready to dislike her for letting the boss get in so deep and not telling him straight out that she was a married woman and he mustn't; but when I saw that she was trying to be just as loyal to him as I was, it pulled me over to her side again.

So I promised to do all the things she told me to do, and to keep her posted as to what was going on; and then she made me feel kind of kiddish and feckless by coming out and helping me into Mr. Van Britt's auto.

Though the boss's disappearance was now four days old, things were still in a sort of daze down at the railroad offices. Of course, the trains were running yet, and, so far as anybody could see, the Short Line was still a going proposition. But the heart was gone out of the whole business, and the entire push was acting as if it were just waiting for the roof to fall in—as I guess it was.

Mr. Van Britt, being the general superintendent and next in command, had moved over into the boss's office, and Fred May was doing his shorthand work. They wouldn't let me do anything much—I couldn't do much with my right arm in a sling—so I had a chance to hang around and size up the situation. If you want to know how it sized up, you can take it from me that it was pretty bad. People all along the line were bombarding Mr. Van

Britt with letters and telegrams wanting to know what was going to be done, and what the change in management was going to mean for the public, and all that. On top of this, the office ante-room was full of callers, some of them just merely curious, but most of them dead anxious. You see, Mr. Norcross had laid out a mighty attractive programme in the little time he had been at the wheel, and now it looked as if it was all going to be dumped into the ditch.

Mr. Van Britt saw and talked with everybody, and when he could wedge off a minute or two of privacy, he'd go into the third room of the suite and thresh it out with Juneman, or Billoughby, or Mr. Ripley. From these private talks I found out that there was still some doubt in the minds of all four of them about the boss's drop-out—as to whether it was voluntary or not.

Also, I found out what had been done during the four days. We had no "company detective" at that time, and Mr. Hornack had borrowed a man named Grimmer from his old company, the Overland Central, wiring for him and getting him on the ground within twenty-four hours of the time of Mr. Norcross's disappearance.

Grimmer had gone to work at once, but everything he had turned up, so far, favored the voluntary runaway theory. Mr. Norcross's trunks were still

in his rooms at the Bullard; but his two grips were gone. And the night clerk at the hotel, when he was pushed to it, remembered that the boss had paid his bill up to date, that night before going up to his rooms.

Past that, the trace was completely lost. The conductor on the Fast Mail, eastbound, on the night in question, ought to have been the next witness. But he wasn't. He swore by all that was good and great that Mr. Norcross hadn't been a passenger on his train. And he would certainly have known it if he had been carrying his general manager. Besides that, the boss wasn't the kind of man to be lost in a crowd; he was too big and too well known by this time to the rank and file.

Over in the other field there was absolutely nothing to incriminate the Hatch people. So far from it, Hatch had turned up at the railroad office, bright and early the morning after Mr. Norcross had gone. He had asked for the boss, and failing to find him, he had hunted up Mr. Van Britt. What he wanted, it seemed, was a chance to reopen the proposition that had been made to him the day before—the offer of the new Citizens' Storage & Warehouse Company to purchase the various Red Tower equipments and plants.

Mr. Van Britt had referred him to Mr. Ripley, and to our lawyer Hatch had made what purported

to be an open confession, admitting that he had gone to Mr. Norcross the night before, determined to fight the new company to a finish, and that there had been a good many things said that would better be forgotten. Now, however, he was willing to talk straight business and a compromise. He had called his board of directors together, and they had voted to sell their track-bordering plants to Citizens' Storage & Warehouse if a price could be amicably agreed upon.

This was the way the matter still stood. With Mr. Norcross gone and a new general manager coming, Mr. Ripley was afraid to make a move, and Hatch was pressing him to get busy on the bargain and sale proposition; was apparently as anxious now to sell and withdraw as he had at first been to fight everything in sight.

By the morning I came on the scene the man Grimmer had, as they say, just about done his do. He was only a sort of journeyman detective, and had run out of clues. When he came in and talked to Mr. Van Britt and Mr. Ripley, I could see that he fully believed in the drop-out theory, and even the lawyer and Mr. Van Britt had to admit that the facts were with him. The boss had written a letter saying definitely that he was quitting; he had paid his hotel bill, and his grips were gone; and two days later President Dunton had appointed a new general

manager, which was proof positive, you'd say, that the boss *had* resigned and had so notified the New York office.

When the noon hour came along, Fred May took me out to luncheon, and we went to the Bullard café. It was pretty rich for our blood at two dollars per, but I guess Fred thought his job was gone, anyway, and felt reckless. Over the good things at our corner table we did a little threshing on our own account—and got a lot more chaff and no grain.

Fred didn't want to agree with Grimmer and the facts, but there didn't seem to be any help for it. And as for me, I had that other thing in mind all the time—the big scary fear that somebody had got to the boss after he had left Ripley on the night of shockings, and had just bashed him in the face with the story of Mrs. Sheila's sham widowhood.

By and by we got around to my burned hand, and Fred told me Grimmer had at least succeeded in clearing up whatever mystery there was about that. The wall switch for the electric light in the lower hall at the headquarters was right beside the outer door jamb—as I knew. It had burned out in some way, and that was why there was no light on when I went down-stairs. And in burning out it had short-circuited itself with the brass lock of the door; Fred didn't know just how, but Grimmer had explained it. I asked him if Grimmer had explained how a 110-

volt light current could cook me like a fried potato, and he said he hadn't.

The afternoon at the office was a sort of cut-and-come-again repeat of the morning, with lots of people milling around and things going crooked and cross-ways, as they were bound to with the boss gone and a new boss coming. Nobody had any heart for anything, and along late in the afternoon when word came of a freight wreck at Cross Creek Gulch, Mr. Van Britt threw up both hands and yipped and swore like a pirate. It just showed what a raw edge the headquarters' nerves were taking on.

Though it wasn't his business, Mr. Van Britt went out with the wrecking train, and Fred May and I had it all to ourselves for the remaining hour or so up to closing time. Just before five, Mr. Cantrell, the editor of the *Mountaineer,* dropped in. He looked a bit disappointed when he found only us two. Fred turned him over to me, and he came on in to the private office when I asked him to, and smoked one of the boss's good cigars out of a box that I found in the big desk.

I liked Cantrell. He was just the sort of man you expect an editor to be; tall and thin and kind of mild-eyed, with an absent way with him that made you feel as if he were thinking along about a mile ahead of you when you were striking the best think-gait you ever knew of. After the cigar was going

he talked a little about my sore hand and then switched over to the big puzzle.

"No word yet from Mr. Norcross, I suppose?" he said.

I told him there wasn't.

"It's very singular, don't you think, Jimmie?—or do you?"

"It's as singular to me, and to all of us, as it is to you," I threw in.

"Branderby"—he was one of the *Mountaineer* reporters—"tells me that you people have had a detective on the job. Did he find out anything?"

"Nothing worth speaking of. He is the Overland Central's 'special,' and I guess his best hold is train robberies and things of that sort."

The editor smoked on for a full minute without saying anything more, and he seemed to be staring absently at a steamship picture on the wall. When he got good and ready, he began again.

"You don't need any common plain-clothes man on this job, Jimmie; you need the best there is: a real, dyed-in-the-wool Sherlock Holmes, if there ever were such a miracle."

"You think it is a case for a detective?"

"I do," he replied, looking straight at me with his mild blue eyes. "If I were one of Mr. Norcross's close friends I should get the best help that could be found and not lose a single minute about it."

Since there was nobody around who was any closer to the boss than I was, I jumped into the hole pretty quick.

"Can you tell us anything that will help, Mr. Cantrell?" I asked.

"Not specifically; I wish I could. But I can say this: I know Mr. Rufus Hatch and his associates up one side and down the other. They are hand-in-glove with the political pirates who control this State. From the little that has leaked out, and the great deal that has been published in the Hatch-controlled newspapers all over the State during the past few weeks, it is apparent that Mr. Norcross's removal was a thing greatly to be desired, not only by the Red Tower people, but also by the political bosses. That ought to be enough to make all of you suspicious—very suspicious, Jimmie."

"It did, and does," I admitted. "But there isn't the slightest reason to think that the Hatch crowd has made away with Mr. Norcross—reason in fact, I mean. Hatch, himself, says that his directors are willing to sell out, and that if Mr. Norcross were here the deal could be closed in a day."

The tall editor got up and made ready to go. "You remember the old saying, current in Europe in Napoleon's time, Jimmie: 'Beware of the Russians when they retreat.' If I were in your place, or rather in Mr. Van Britt's, I'd get an expert on this

job—and I shouldn't let much grass grow under my feet while I was about it. Call me up at the *Mountaineer* office if I can help." And with that he went away.

It was just a little while after this that I put on my hat and strolled across the yard tracks to Kirgan's office in the shops. Kirgan was an old friend, as you might say: he had been on the Oregon building job with us and knew the boss through and through. I didn't have anything special to say, but I kind of wanted to talk to somebody who knew. So I loafed in on Kirgan.

I wish I could show you Mart Kirgan just as he was. You'd pick him up anywhere for the toughest Bad Man from Bitter Creek that ever swaggered into a saloon to throw down on some poor tenderfoot and make him dance by shooting at his heels: big-jowled, black, with a hard jaw, sultry hot eyes, and a pair of drooping mustaches like the penny picture-makers used to put on One-Eyed Ike, the Terror of the Uintahs.

Really, however, Mart wasn't half as savage as he looked; he didn't have to be, you know, looking that way. And he loved the boss like a brother. As soon as I came in, he fired his kid stenographer on some errand or other, and made me sit down and tell him all I knew. When I got through he was pulling at his long mustache and wrinkling his nose as I've

seen a bulldog do when he was getting ready to bite something.

"You haven't got all the drop-out business cornered over yonder in the general office, Jimmie," he said slowly, tilting back in his swing-chair and glowering at me with those sultry eyes of his. "On that same night that you're talkin' about, I stand to lose one perfectly good Atlantic-type locomotive. At ten o'clock she was set in on the spur below the coal chutes. At twelve o'clock, when the round-house watchman went down there to see if her fire was banked all right, she was gone."

XIII

The Lost 1016

WHEN Kirgan told me he was shy a whole locomotive, I began to see all sorts of fireworks. Of course, there was nothing on earth to connect the boss's disappearance with that of the engine which had been left standing below the coal chutes, but the two things snapped themselves together for me like the halves of an automatic coupling, and I couldn't wedge them apart.

"An engine—even a little old Atlantic-type—is a pretty big thing to lose, isn't it, Kirgan?" I asked.

Kirgan righted his chair with a crash.

"Jimmie, I've sifted this blamed outfit through an eighty-mesh screen!" he growled. "With all the devil-to-pay that's goin' on over at the headquarters, I didn't want to bother Mr. Van Britt, and I haven't been advertisin' in the newspapers. But it's a holy fact, Jimmie. That engine's faded away, and nobody saw or heard it go. I've had men out for four days, now, lookin' and pryin' 'round and askin' questions in every hole and corner of the three divisions. It ain't any use. The 'Sixteen's gone!"

"But, listen," I broke in. "If anybody tried to

steal it, it couldn't pass the first telegraph station east or west without being reported. And that isn't saying anything at all about the risk of hypering a wild engine over the main line without orders."

"I know all that, Jimmie," he agreed. "But the fact's right here amongst us. The Ten-Sixteen's lost."

I was still trying to pry myself loose from the notion that the loss of the engine, and the boss's disappearance at about the same time, were in some way connected with each other. It was no use; the idea refused to let go.

"Look here, Kirgan," I shoved in; "can you think of any possible reason why Mr. Norcross should write Mr. Van Britt a letter saying that he had quit and was going east on the midnight train, and then should change his mind and come down here and go somewhere on that engine?"

After I had said it, it sounded so foolish that I wanted to take it back. But Kirgan didn't seem to look at it that way.

"Well, I'll be shot!" he exclaimed. "I never once thought of that! But where the devil would he go? And how would he get there without somebody findin' out? And why in Sam Hill would he do a thing like that, anyway? Why, sufferin' Moses! if he wanted to go anywhere, all he had to do was to order out his car and tell the despatcher, and *go*."

"I can't figure it out any better than you can," I confessed. "At the same time, I can't break away from the notion. Mr. Norcross is gone, and the Ten-Sixteen is gone, and they both dropped out between ten and twelve o'clock on the same night. Mart, I don't believe Mr. Norcross went east at all! I believe, when we find that engine, we'll find *him!*"

Kirgan got out of his chair and began to walk up and down in the little space between his desk and the drawing-board. Besides being the best boss mechanic in the West, he was a first-class fighting man, with a clear head and nerve to burn. When he had got as far as he could go alone he turned on me.

"Jimmie, do you reckon this Red Tower outfit was far enough along in its scrap with the boss to put up a job to pass him out of the game?" he demanded.

I told him it didn't seem to fit into any twentieth-century scheme of things, and past that I mentioned the fact that the Hatch people had taken the back track and were now offering to sell out and stop chocking the wheels of reform.

"I know," he put in. "But I've been readin' the papers, Jimmie, and it ain't all Red Tower, not by a jugful. The big graft in this neck-a woods is political, and the Red Tower gang is only set-a cogs in the bull-wheel. Mr. Norcross was gettin' himself mighty pointedly disliked; you know that. The

way he was aimin' to run things, it was beginnin' to look as if maybe the people of this State might wake up some day and turn in and help him."

"I know all about that," I threw in. "But where are you trying to land, Mart?"

"Right here. Mr. Norcross was the whole show. Take him out of it and the whole shootin'-match would fall to pieces—as it's doin', right now. They didn't need to slug him or shoot him up or anything like that: if it could be made to look as if he'd jumped the job, quit, chucked it all up, why there you are. A new boss would be sent out here, and you could bet your sweet life he wouldn't be anybody like Mr. Norcross. Not so you could notice it. The New York people would take blamed good care-a that."

"You think the Dunton people are standing in with the graft?"

"Nobody could've grabbed off the motive-power job on this railroad, as I did, Jimmie, and not think it—and be damn' sure of it. Why, Lord o' Heavens, the Red Tower bunch was usin' us just the same as if we belonged to 'em!—orderin' our men to do their machinery repairs, helpin' themselves to any railroad material that they happened to need, usin' our cars and engines on their loggin' roads and mine branches."

"You stopped all this?"

"You bet I did—between two days! They've been makin' seventeen different kinds of a roar ever since, but I've had Mr. Van Britt and the Big Boss behind me, so I just shoved ahead."

What Kirgan said about the Red Tower people using our rolling stock on their private branch roads set a bee to buzzing in my brain. What if they had stolen the 1016 to use in that way? I let the bee loose, and Kirgan grabbed at it like a cat jumping for a grasshopper.

"Say, Jimmie, boy—you've got a pretty middlin' long head on you when you give it room to play in," he grunted. "The string's tangled up about as bad as it was before, but I believe you're gettin' hold of the loose end."

"You have a blue-print of the Portal Division here, haven't you?" I asked. "Dig it up and let's have a look at it."

He didn't know where to look for the blue-print, but just then his boy stenographer came back and found it for us. The shop whistle had blown and it was quitting time, so Kirgan told the boy he could go on home. When we were alone again I unrolled the blue-print and we began to study it carefully with an eye to the possibilities.

At first the facts threatened to bluff us. The blue-print engineers' map was an old one, but it showed the spurs and side-tracks, the stations and

water tanks. Since the lost engine had been standing at the western end of the Portal City yards, we didn't try to trace it eastward. To get out in that direction it would have had to pass the round-house, the shops, the passenger station and the headquarters building, and, even at that time of night, somebody would have been sure to see it.

Tracing the other way—westward—we had a clear track for ten miles to Arroyo. Arroyo had no night operator, so we agreed that the stolen engine might easily have slipped past there without being marked down. Eight miles beyond Arroyo we came to Banta, the first night station west of Portal City. Here, as we figured it, the wild engine must have been seen by the operator, if by no one else. Banta was an apple town, and the town itself might have been asleep, but the wire man at the station shouldn't have been.

"Let's hold Banta in suspense a bit, and allow that by some means or other the thieves managed to get by," I suggested. "The next thing to be considered is the fact that the Ten-Sixteen must now have been running—without orders, we must remember—against the Fast Mail coming east. The Mail didn't pass her anywhere—not officially, at least; if it had, the fact would show up in some station's report to the despatcher's office."

At this, we hunted up an official time-card and be-

gan to figure on the "meet" proposition. The Fast Mail was due at Portal City at twelve-twenty, and on the night in question it had been on time. Making due time allowances for inaccuracy in the yard watchman's story, the missing engine could hardly have left the Portal City yard much before ten-forty-five.

The Fast Mail was scheduled at forty miles an hour. Its time at Banta was eleven-fifty-three. Allowing the 1016 the same rate of speed in the opposite direction, it would have passed Banta at eleven-twelve or thereabouts. Hence there would still be forty-one minutes running time to be divided between the eastbound train and the westbound engine. In other words, the meeting-point, with the two running at the same speed, would fall about twenty minutes west of Banta.

When we tried to figure this meeting-point out we were stuck. Banta lay in the lap of an irrigated valley in the hogback, a valley which the diverted waters of Banta Creek had turned into an orchardist's paradise. West of the town the railroad ran through a hill country, winding around among the spurs of the Timber Mountain range and heading for the Sand Creek desert where Mr. Chadwick had had his adventure with the hold-ups.

Tracing the line on the blue-print, we hunted for a possible passing point, which, according to the way

we had things doped out, should have been not more than thirteen or fourteen miles west of Banta. There was a blind siding ten miles west, but beyond that, nothing east of Sand Creek, which was twenty-one miles farther along; at least, there was nothing that showed up on the map. The ten-mile siding might have served for the passing point, but in that case the crew of the Fast Mail would surely have seen the 1016 waiting on the siding as they came by. And they hadn't seen it; Kirgan said they had been questioned promptly the following morning.

Though I had been over the road with Mr. Norcross in his private car any number of times since we had taken hold, I didn't recall the detail topographies very clearly, and I couldn't seem to remember anything about this siding ten miles west of Banta. So I asked Kirgan.

"That siding isn't in any such shape that the Fast Mail could get by without seeing a 'meet' train on the side-track, is it?"

The big master-mechanic shook his head.

"Hardly, you'd think. I reckon we're up a stump, Jimmie. That siding is part of an old 'Y' at the mouth of a gulch that runs back into the mountains for maybe a dozen miles or so. They tell me the 'Y' was put in for the Timber Mountain Lumber outfit when they used the gulch mouth for their shipping point. They had one of their saw-mills up

in the gulch somewhere, but the business died out when they got the timber all cut off."

This time I was the one who did the cat-and-grasshopper act.

"Tell me this, Mart," I put in quickly. "The Timber Mountain company is one of the Red Tower monopolies: did it have a railroad track up that gulch connecting with our 'Y'?"

"Why, yes; I reckon so. I'm not right sure that there ain't one there yet. But if there is, it's been disconnected from the 'Y'. I'm sure of that, because I went in on that 'Y' one day with the wrecker."

You'd think this would have settled it. But I hung on like a dog to a root.

"Say, Mart," I insisted, "this 'Y' siding we're talking about is just around where the Ten-Sixteen ought to have met the Mail; so far as we can tell by this map it's the only place where it could have met it. And the old gulch track would have been a mighty good hiding-place for the stolen engine!"

"There ain't any track there," said Kirgan, shaking his head; "or, leastwise, if there is, it hasn't any rail connection with our siding, just as I'm tellin' you. We'll have to look farther along."

Somehow, I couldn't get it out of my head but that I was right. Our guesses all went as straight as a string to that 'Y' siding ten miles west of Banta, and

I was sure that if I had been talking to Mr. Van Britt I could have convinced him. But Kirgan was awfully hard-headed.

"It's supper time," he said, after we had mulled a while longer over the map. "To-morrow, if you like, we'll take an engine and run down there. But we ain't goin' to find anything. I can tell you that, right now."

"Yes, and to-morrow we may have the new general manager, and then you and I and all the others will be hunting for some other railroad to work on," I retorted.

I pretty nearly had him over the edge, but I couldn't push him the rest of the way to save my life.

"If there was the least little scrap-a reason even to imagine that Mr. Norcross had gone off on that stolen eight-wheeler, it would be different, Jimmie," he protested. "But there ain't; and you know dog-goned well there ain't. Let's go up-town and hunt up something to eat. You'll feel a heap clearer in your mind when you get a good square meal inside o' your clothes."

We left the shop offices together, and got shut out, crossing the yard, by a freight that was pulling in from the West. There was a yard crew shifting on the other side of the incoming train, and rather than wait for the double obstruction to clear itself,

we walked down the shop track, meaning to go around the lower end of things.

This detour took us past the round-house, and when we reached the turn-table lead, the engine of the just-arrived freight came backing down the skip-track. Seeing Kirgan, the engineer swung down from the step at the lead switch, leaving the hostler to "spot" the engine on the table. I knew the engineer by sight. His name was Gorcher, and he was a reformed cow-punch'—with a record for getting out of more tight places with a heavy train than any other man on the division.

"Here's lookin' at you, Mr. Kirgan," he said, with a sort of Happy Hooligan grin on his smutty face. "You been passin' the word, quiet, among the boys to keep an eye out f'r that Atlantic-type that got lost in the shuffle, ain't you? Well, I found her."

"What's that—where?" snapped Kirgan, in a tone that made a noise like the pop of a whip-lash.

"You know that old gravel pit that digs into the hill a mile west of the old 'Y' on the Timber Mountain grade? Well, she's there; plumb at the far end o' that gravel track, cold *and* dead."

"When did you see her?"

"Just now—comin' in. We had to cut and double, comin' up Timber Mountain hill. 'Stead o' pullin' all the way up to the 'Y' and losin' more

time, I doubled in on that old gravel track. There she was, as big as a house."

"Crippled?" Kirgan rapped out.

"Not as we could see; just dead. She's got her nose shoved a piece into the gravel bank, but she ain't off the rail."

Kirgan nodded. "That counts one for you, Billy. Who else saw her?"

"Nobody but the boys on our train, I reckon."

"All right. Don't spread it. And get hold of the others and tell 'em not to spread it. Want to make a little overtime?"

"I ain't kickin' none."

"That's business. After you've had your supper, call up your fireman and report to me here at the round-house. We'll take a light engine and go down along and get that runaway."

This seemed to settle Kirgan's half of the puzzle. We hadn't taken the gravel track into our calculations simply because it wasn't marked on the map we had been studying; but that merely meant that the pit had been opened some time after the map had been made.

When Gorcher had gone into the round-house to wash up and tell his fireman to report back, Kirgan and I crossed the yard and headed for town. I left the master-mechanic at the door of a Greek eat-shop that he patronized and went on up to the Bullard.

There had been nothing more said about connecting the boss's disappearance with that of the stolen engine, and the idea seemed too ridiculous to hold on to, anyway. Mr. Norcross had said, in the letter to Mr. Van Britt, that he was going to quit; and, so far as we knew—or didn't know, rather—he had done it and had taken his grips and gone to the midnight Mail.

Against this, of course, there was the Mail conductor's positive assertion that he hadn't carried the boss. But conductors are no more infallible than other people, and once in a blue moon in going through a train they miss a passenger. I remembered the one thing that might have made the boss desperate. If somebody had slammed the Mrs. Sheila story at him there was reason enough for a blow-up.

I was just getting around to my piece of canned pumpkin pie—which wasn't half as good as the kind Maisie Ann fed me out at the major's—when the kid from the despatcher's office came into the grill-room, stretching his neck as if he were looking for somebody. When he got his eye on me he came across to my corner and handed me a telegram. It was from Mr. Chadwick, under a Chicago date line, and it was addressed "To the General Manager's Office," just like that. There were only nine words in it, but they were all strictly to the point: "What's

gone wrong? Where is Mr. Norcross? Answer quick."

I saw in half a second at least a part of what had happened. Mr. Chadwick was back from his Canadian trip, and somebody—the New York people, perhaps—had wired him that a new general manager had been appointed for Pioneer Short Line. The old wheat king's quick shot at our office showed that he wasn't in the plot, and that, whatever else had become of him, *Mr. Norcross hadn't as yet turned up in Chicago!*

Gee! but that brought on more talk—a whaling lot of it. I meant to find out, right away, if Mr. Van Britt had come back from the Cross Creek wreck. He was the man to answer Mr. Chadwick's wire. But an interruption butted in suddenly, just as I was signing the dinner check. The head waiter, who knew me from having seen me so often with the boss, came over to say that I was wanted quick at the telephone.

It was Mrs. Sheila on the wire, and I could tell by the way her voice sounded that she was mightily excited.

"I've been calling you on every phone I could think of," was the way she began; and then: "Where is Mr. Van Britt?"

I told her about the wreck, and said I was afraid he hadn't got back yet. I heard something that

sounded like a muffled and half-impatient, "Oh, dear!" and then she went on. "I have just had a phone message from Mr. Cantrell, the editor of the *Mountaineer*. He called the house to try to find Major Kendrick. He has heard something which may explain about Mr. Norcross. He said he didn't want to put it on the wire."

That was enough for me. "I'll go right over to the *Mountaineer* office," I told her; and in just about two shakes of a dead lamb's tail, I was standing at Mr. Cantrell's elbow in his little den on the third floor of the newspaper building across the Avenue.

"Mrs. Macrae telephoned you?" he asked, pushing his bunch of copy paper aside.

"Yes; just a minute ago."

"I'll give you what I have, and you may do what you please with it. One of our young men—Branderby—has a clue; a very slight one. He has discovered—in some way that he didn't care to explain over the phone—that there was a plot of some kind concocted in the back room of a dive on lower Nevada Avenue on the night Mr. Norcross disappeared. From what Branderby says, I take it that the plot was overheard, in part, at least, by some habitue of the place who was too drunk to get it entirely straight and intelligible. The plotters were four of Clanahan's men, and, as Branderby got

it, they were planning to steal a locomotive. Do you know anything about that?"

"I do. The engine was stolen all right, that very night. Kirgan, our master-mechanic, has known it was gone, but he has been keeping quiet in hopes he'd be able to find the engine without making any public stir about it."

"The story, as it has been handed on to Branderby, is pretty badly muddled," the editor went on. "There was something in it about an attempt to wreck and rob the Fast Mail, and something else about sending a note to somebody at the Bullard—a note that 'would do the business,' was the way it was put."

"That note was sent to Mr. Norcross!" I broke in excitedly, taking a running jump at the guess.

"If you will wait until Branderby comes in, he may be able to give you more of the particulars," Cantrell was beginning to say; but good gosh!—I couldn't wait. I was scared stiff for fear I shouldn't be able to get back to the round-house before Kirgan started out on that engine-rescuing trip.

"That's enough," I gasped; "I'm gone!" and I tumbled down the two flights of stairs and sprinted for the railroad yard, reaching the round-house not one half-second too soon. Kirgan was there, with Gorcher and two firemen. They had a light engine

out on the tank track and were filling her with water.

It was Kirgan himself who gave me a hand up the steps to the high foot-plate. Gorcher was oiling around and the two firemen were up on the tender.

"They took Mr. Norcross with them on the Ten-Sixteen!" was all I could say and then I guess my late electric knock-out got in its work to pay for the quick sprint down from the newspaper office, for I keeled over into Kirgan's arms and sort of half fainted, it seemed.

Because, when I came to, right good again, Kirgan had me up on the fireman's box, with an arm around me to hold me there: Billy Gorcher was on the other side of the cab, niggling at the throttle; and the light engine was clicking it off about fifty miles an hour on the straight piece of track between Portal City and Arroyo.

XIV

A Close Call

BILLY GORCHER did some swift wheel-rolling on the stretch of straight track where our "betterment" campaign had already begun to get in its good work. We had orders against a fast freight coming eastward at Banta, and we made the eighteen miles in a little over twenty minutes, shooting in on the siding at Banta just as the headlight of the freight was showing up in the western hills beyond the town.

From Banta on, we took it a bit easier—had to. The track was pretty crooked among the hills and Gorcher hit the curves like a man who knew his trade and didn't mean to put us into the ditch.

At the "Y" siding we stopped—without going on to the gravel track where Gorcher had seen the lost 1016—and Kirgan and I got off with a lantern. This was because, on the way down, I had managed to tell the big master-mechanic about the Cantrell talk, though I hadn't succeeded in making him believe that it accounted for Mr. Norcross's drop-out. Just the same he humored me by having Billy Gor-

cher stop, and now he was trying to make me take it sort of slow and easy as we stumbled out toward the stem of the "Y." That was Kirgan's way. He was as hard as nails with a gang of men, but he could be as soft-hearted as any woman when a fellow was all in. And he knew I wasn't half "at myself" yet, physically.

"Don't you get too much hope up, Jimmie," he was saying, as we humped along around the crooking track of the "Y." "We ain't goin' to find anything out yonder but a rusty loggin' track and that broken rail connection. You see, I've been here before, and I know."

He was as right as could be. When we reached the end of the "Y" there was the broken connection, just as he'd said. The old saw-mill track was still there, leading off in the dark up the gulch, but the two switch rails had been taken out and the switch itself was as rusty as if it hadn't been used in years.

"What you heard from Mr. Cantrell may have been all true enough," Kirgan said, while I stood swallowing hard and staring down at the broken rail connection, "only it didn't have anything to do with the Big Boss. Them thugs was probably plannin' to wreck the Mail, all right, and they came down here to do it. The Lord only knows why they didn't do it; p'raps there wasn't time enough, after they'd got the 'Sixteen in on the gravel track."

I only just about half heard what he was saying. He had the lantern, and its light fell squarely upon a cross-tie a foot or two beyond where we were standing. It was the last tie in the empty string from which the two rails had been taken up to break the connection with the lighter saw-mill track steel, and what I was looking at was a fresh spike hole; fresh beyond all question of doubt because there was a clean new splinter of the wood sticking up beside it—a splinter that had been broken out when the spike was pulled.

I took the lantern from Kirgan in my one good hand, and he stood there waiting for me while I walked on out to the chopped-off end of the saw-mill track, examining the loose ties as I went along. There were fresh spike holes in some of the others; just one here and there. But that was enough. After I had knelt to hold the lantern close to the rails of the rusty timber track I knew my hunch was all right.

"Come here, Mart!" I called, and when he came, I showed him the new holes and new wheel-marks on the old rusty rails of the timber track that proved as clear as daylight that an engine or a train had been over them away this side of the rains and the snows that had rusted them.

Kirgan didn't say a word—not to me. He just took one look at the rubbed rails and then yelled

back to Gorcher to run out on the "Y." What followed went like clockwork. There were tools, a spike-puller and a driving-maul, on the light engine's tender, and while the two firemen were throwing them off, Kirgan made a couple of swift measurements with his pocket tape.

"These two, right here, boys," he ordered, indicating a pair of rails in the other leg of the "Y," and in less than no time the two rails were up and relaid to bridge the gap of the broken connection.

Gorcher moved the engine carefully over the temporary connection, with Kirgan watching to see that she didn't ditch herself. When the crossing was safely made we all climbed on, and Gorcher began to feel his way cautiously out over the saw-mill track. Kirgan hadn't explained anything, but that didn't matter. We didn't know where we were going, but we were on our way.

I suppose we poked along into the black heart of the Timber range for as much as five or six miles before the engine headlight showed us the remains of the old saw-mill camp lying in a little pocket-like valley from the sides of which all the mill timber had been cut. The camp had been long deserted. There were perhaps a dozen shacks of all sizes and shapes, and with a single exception they were all dilapidated and dismantled, some with the roofs falling in.

The one exception was the stout log building which had probably served as the mill-gang commissary and store. It stood a little back on the slope, and was on the opposite side of the creek from the mill site and sleeping-shacks. The ties at this end of the line were so rotten with age that our engine was grinding a good half of them to powder as she edged up, and a little below the switch that had formerly led in to the mill, Kirgan gave Gorcher the stop signal.

After we had piled off, there wasn't any question raised as to what we should do. Kirgan had taken a hammer from Gorcher's tool-box, and he was the one who led the way straight across the little creek and up the hill to the commissary. I had the lantern, but it wasn't needed. From where the engine was standing, the headlight flooded the whole gulch basin with its electric beam, picking out every detail of the deserted saw-mill camp.

When we reached the log commissary we found the windows all boarded up and the door fastened with a strong hasp and a bright new brass padlock—the only new thing in sight. Kirgan swung his hammer just once and the lock went spinning off down the slope and fell with a splash into the creek. Then he pushed the door open with his foot, and shoved in; and for just one half-second I was afraid to follow—afraid of what we might find in that gloomy

looking log warehouse, with its blinded windows and locked door.

I thank the good Lord I had my scare for nothing. While I was nerving myself and stumbling over the threshold behind Kirgan with the lantern, I heard the boss's voice, and it wasn't the voice of any dead man, not by a long shot! From what he said, and the way he was trimming it up with hot ones, it was evident that he took us for some other crowd that he'd been cussing out before.

The light of the lantern showed us a long room, bare of furnishings, and dark and musty from having been shut up so tight. In the far end there were a couple of bunks built against the log wall. On what had once been the counter of the commissary there was a lot of canned stuff and a box of crackers that had been broken open, and on a bench by the door there was a bucket of water and a tin cup.

The boss was sitting up in one of the bunks, and he was still tearing off language in strips at us when we closed in on him. He recognized Kirgan first, and then Gorcher. I guess he couldn't see me very well because I was holding the lantern. When he found out who we were, he stopped swearing and got up out of the bunk to put his hand on Mart Kirgan's shoulder. That was the only break he made to show that he was a man, like the rest of us. The next minute he was the Big Boss again, rapping out

his orders as if he had just pushed his desk button to call us in.

"You've got an engine here, I suppose?" he snapped, at Kirgan. "Then we'll get out of this quick. What day of the week is it?"

I told him it was Friday, and by his asking that, I knew he must have been so roughly handled that he had lost count of time. The next order was shot at the two firemen.

"You boys kick that packing-box to pieces and then pull the straw out of that bunk and touch a match to it. We'll make sure that they'll never lock anybody else up in this damned dog-hole."

The two young huskies obeyed the order promptly. In half a minute the dry slab stuff that the bunks were built of was ablaze and the boss herded us to the door. In the open he stopped and looked around as if he had half a mind to burn the rest of the deserted lumber camp, but if he had any such notion he thought better of it, and a minute or so later we were all climbing into the cab of the waiting engine.

I had one last glimpse of the commissary as Gorcher released the air and the backing engine slid away around the first curve. It was sweating smoke through the split-shingle roof, and the open door framed a square of lurid crimson. I guess the boss was right. "They," whoever they were, wouldn't ever lock anybody else up in that particular shack.

A Close Call

We had to run so slowly down the old track to the "Y" that there was plenty of chance for the boss to talk, if he had wanted to. But apparently he didn't want to. He sat on the fireman's seat, with an arm back of me to hold me on, just as Kirgan had sat on the way up, and never opened his head except once to ask me what was the matter with my wrapped-up hand. When I told him, he made no comment, and didn't speak again until we had stopped on the leg of the "Y" to let Kirgan and his three helpers put the borrowed rails back into place. That left just the two of us in the cab, and I thought maybe he would tell me some of the particulars, but he didn't. Instead, he made me tell him.

"You say it's Friday," he began abruptly. "What's been going on since Monday night, Jimmie?"

I boiled it down for him into just as few words as possible; about the letter he had left for Mr. Van Britt, how everybody thought he had resigned, how Mrs. Sheila and the major were two of the few who weren't willing to believe it, how Mr. Chadwick had been out of reach, how the railroad outfit was flopping around like a chicken with its head chopped off, how President Dunton had appointed a new general manager who was expected now on any train, how Gorcher had discovered the lost 1016 on the old disused gravel-pit track a mile below us, and, to wind

up with, I slipped him Mr. Chadwick's telegram which had come just as I was finishing my supper in the Bullard grill-room, and those two others that had come on the knock-out night, and which had been in my pocket ever since.

He heard me through without saying a word, and when I gave him the telegrams he read them by the light of the gauge lamp—also without saying anything. But when the men had the "Y" rails replaced he took hold of things again with a jerk.

"Kirgan, you'll want to see to getting that dead engine out of the gravel pit yourself. Take one of the firemen and go to it. It's a short mile and you can walk it. Jimmie and I want to get back to Portal City in a hurry, and Gorcher will take us." And then to Gorcher: "We'll run to Banta ahead of Number Eighteen and get orders there. Move lively, Billy; time's precious."

The orders were carried out precisely as they were given. Kirgan took one of the huskies and tramped off in the darkness down the main line, and Gorcher, turning our engine on the "Y," headed back east. This time he wasn't so awfully careful of the curves and sags as he had been coming up, and we made Banta at a record clip. While he was in the Banta wire office, getting orders for Portal City, Mr. Norcross took the time-card out of its cage in the cab and fell to studying it by the light of

the gauge lamp. Gorcher came back pretty soon with his clearance, which gave him the right to run to Arroyo as first section of Number Eighteen.

The boss blew up like a Roman candle when he saw that train order. It meant that we were to take the siding at Arroyo with the freight that was just behind us, and wait there for the westbound "Flyer," the "Flyer" being due in Portal City from the east at 9:15, and due to leave there, coming west, at 9:20. I didn't realize at the moment why the boss was so sizzling anxious to cut out the delay which would be imposed on us by the wait at Arroyo, but the anxiety was there, all right.

"Billy, it's eighteen miles to Portal, and you've got twenty minutes to make it against the 'Flyer's' leaving time," he ripped out. "Can you do it?"

Gorcher said he could, if he didn't have to lose any more time getting his order changed.

"Let her go!" snapped the boss. "I'm taking all the responsibility."

That was enough for Gorcher, and the way we hustled out of the Banta yard was a caution. By the time we hit the last set of switches the old "Pacific-type" was lurching like a ship at sea, and once out on the long grass-country tangents she went like a shot out of a gun. Of course, with nothing to pull but her own weight she had plenty of steam, and all Gor-

cher had to do was to keep her from choking herself with too much of it.

He did it to the queen's taste; and in exactly eight minutes out of Banta we tore over the switches at Arroyo. That left us ten miles to go, and twelve minutes in which to make them. It looked pretty easy, and it would have been if the night crew hadn't been switching in the lower Portal City yard when we finished the race and Gorcher was whistling for the town stop. There was a hold-out of perhaps two minutes while the shifter was getting out of our way, and when we finally went clattering up through the yard, the "Flyer," a few minutes late, was just pulling in from the opposite direction.

A yardman let us in on the spur at the end of the headquarters building, and the boss was off in half a jiffy. "Come along with me, Jimmie," he commanded quickly, and I couldn't imagine why he was in such a tearing hurry. Pushing through the platform crowd, made up of people who were getting off the "Flyer" and those who were waiting to get on, he led the way straight up-stairs to our offices.

Of course, there was nobody there at that time of night, and the place was all dark until we switched the electrics on. There was a little lavatory off the third room of the suite, and Mr. Norcross went in and washed his face and hands. In a minute or two he came out, put on his office coat, opened up his

desk, lighted a cigar and sat down at the desk as though he had just come in from a late dinner at the club. And still he had me guessing.

The guess didn't have to wait long. While I was making a bluff at uncovering my typewriter and getting ready for business there was a heavy step in the hall, and a red-faced, portly gentleman with fat eyes and little close-cropped English side-whiskers came bulging in. He had a light top-coat on his arm, and his tan gloves were an exact match for his spats.

"Good evening," he said, nodding sort of brusquely at the boss. "I'm looking for the general manager's office."

"You've found it," said the boss, crisply.

The tan-gloved gentleman looked first at me and then at Mr. Norcross.

"You are the chief clerk, perhaps?" he suggested, pitching the query in the general direction of the big desk.

"Hardly," was the curt rejoinder. "My name is Norcross. What can I do for you?"

If I didn't hate slang so bad, I should say that the portly man looked as if he were going to throw a fit.

"Not—not Graham Norcross?" he stammered.

"Well, yes; I am 'Graham'—to my friends. Anything else?"

The portly gentleman subsided into a chair.

"There is some misunderstanding about this," he

said, his voice thickening a little—with anger, I thought. "My name is Dismuke, and I am the general manager of this railroad."

"I wouldn't dispute the name, but your title is away off," said Mr. Norcross, as cool as a handful of dry snow. "Who appointed you, if I may ask?"

"President Dunton and the board of directors, of course."

"The same authority appointed me, something like three months ago," was the calm reply. "So far as I know, I am still at the head of the company's staff in Portal City."

The gentleman who had named himself Dismuke puffed out his cheeks and looked as if he were about to explode.

"This is a devil of a mess!" he rapped out. "I understood—we all understood in New York—that you had resigned!"

"Well, I haven't," retorted the boss shortly. And then he stuck the knife in good and deep and twisted it around. "There is a commercial telegraph wire in the Hotel Bullard, where I suppose you will put up, Mr. Dismuke, and I'm sure you will find it entirely at your service. If you have anything further to say to me I hope it will keep until after this office opens in the morning. I am very busy, just now."

I mighty nearly gasped. This Dismuke was the new general manager, appointed, doubtless in all

good faith, by the president and sent out to take charge of things. And here was the boss practically ordering him out of the office—telling him that his room was better than his company!

The portly man got out of his chair, puffing like a steam-engine.

"We'll see about this!" he threatened. "You've been here three months and you haven't done anything but muddle things until the stock of the company isn't worth much more than the paper it's printed on! If I can get a clear wire to New York, you'll have word from President Dunton to-morrow morning telling you where you get off!"

To this Mr. Norcross made no reply whatever, and the heavy-footed gentleman stumped out, saying things to himself that wouldn't look very well in print. When the hall door below gave a big slam to let us know that he was still going, the boss looked across at me with a sour grin wrinkling around his eyes.

"Now you know why I made Gorcher break all the rules of the service getting here, Jimmie," he said. "From what you told me down yonder on the old 'Y,' I gathered that my successor was not yet on the ground, but that he was likely to be at any minute. That's why I wanted to beat the 'Flyer' in. Possession is nine points of the law, and in this case it was rather important that Mr. Dismuke shouldn't

find the outfit without a head and these offices of ours unoccupied." He rose, stretched his arms over his head like a tired boy, and reached for the golf cap he kept to wear when he went out to knock around in the shops and yard. "Let's go up to the hotel and see if we can break into the café, Jimmie," he finished up. "Later on, we'll wire Mr. Chadwick; but that can wait. I haven't had a square meal in four days."

XV

The Machine

WITH everybody supposing he had resigned and left the country, I guess there were all kinds of a nine-minutes' wonder in Portal City, and all along the Short Line, when the word went out that Mr. Norcross was back on the job and running it pretty much the same as if nothing had happened.

We, of the general offices, didn't hear much of the comment, naturally, because we were all too busy to sit in on the gossip game, but no doubt there was plenty of it: the more since the boss—a bit grimmer than usual—hadn't much to say about his drop-out; little even to the members of his staff, and nothing at all for publication. I suppose he broke over to the major, to Cantrell, and, of course, to Mrs. Sheila; but these were all in the family, too, as you might say.

After supper, on the night of his return from the hide-out, he had sent a long code message to Mr. Chadwick, and a short one to President Dunton; and though I didn't see the reply to either, I guess Mr. Chadwick's answer, as least, was the right kind, be-

cause our track-renewing campaign went into commission again with a slam, and all the reform policies took a sure-enough fresh start and began to hump themselves, with Juneman working the newspapers to a finish.

We heard nothing further from Mr. Dismuke, the portly gentleman in the tan spats, though he still stayed on at the Bullard. We saw him occasionally at meal times, and twice he was eating at the same table with Hatch and Henckel. That placed him all right for us, though I guess he didn't need much placing. I kind of wished he'd go away. His staying on made it look as if there might be more to follow.

I wondered a little at first that Mr. Norcross didn't take the clue that Branderby, the *Mountaineer* reporter, had given us and tear loose on the gang that had trapped him. He didn't; or didn't seem to. From the first hour of the first day he was up to his neck pushing things for the new company formed for the purpose of putting Red Tower out of business, and he wouldn't take a minute's time for anything else.

Of course, it says itself that Hatch never made any more proposals about selling the Red Tower plants to the Citizens' Storage & Warehouse people after the boss got back. That move went into the discard in a hurry, and the Consolidation outfit was

busy getting into its fighting clothes, and trying to chock the wheels of the C. S. & W. with all sorts of legal obstacles.

Franchise contracts with the railroad were flashed up, and injunctions were prayed for. Ripley waded in, and what little sleep he got for a week or two was in Pullman cars, snatched while he was rushing around and trying to keep his new clients, the C. S. & W. folks, out of jail for contempt of court. He did it. Little and quiet and smooth-spoken, he could put the legal leather into the biggest bullies the other side could hire. Luckily, we were an interstate corporation, and when the local courts proved crooked, Ripley would find some way to jerk the case out of them and put it up to some Federal judge.

Around home in Portal City things were just simmering. Between two days, as you might say, and right soon after Mr. Norcross got back, we acquired a new chum on the headquarters force. He was a young fellow named Tarbell, who looked and talked and acted like a cow-punch just in from riding line. He was carried on Mr. Van Britt's payroll as an "extra" or "relief" telegraph operator; though we never heard of his being sent out to relieve anybody.

I sized this new young man up, right away, for a "special" of some sort, and the proof that I was

right came one afternoon when Ripley dropped in and fell into a chair to fan himself with his straw hat like a man who had just put down a load that he had been carrying about a mile and a half farther than he had bargained to.

"Thank the Lord, the last of those injunction suits is off the docket," he said, drawing a long breath and wagging his neat little head at the boss. "I'll say one thing for the Hatch people, Norcross; they're stubborn fighters. It makes me sweat when I remember that all this is only the preliminary; that the real fight will come when Citizens' Storage & Warehouse enters the field as a business competitor of the Consolidated. That is when the fur will fly."

"We'll beat 'em," predicted the boss. "They've got to let go. How about our C. S. & W. friends? Are they still game?"

"Fine!" asserted the lawyer. "That man Bigelow, at Lesterburg, is a host in himself. After he had pulled his own 'local' into shape, he went out and helped the others organize. The stock is over-subscribed everywhere, now, and C. S. & W. is a going concern. The building boom is on. I venture to say there are over two thousand mechanics at work at the different centers, rushing up the buildings for the new plants, at this moment. You ought to have a monument, Norcross. It's the most original scheme for breaking a monopoly that was ever devised."

The boss was looking out of the window sort of absently, chewing on his cigar, which had gone out.

"Ripley, I wonder what you'd say if I should tell you that the idea is not mine?" he said, after a little pause.

"Not yours?"

"No; it, or at least the germ of it, was given to me by a woman; a woman who knows no more about business details than you do about driving white elephants."

"I'd like to be made acquainted with the lady," said Ripley, with a tired little smile. "Such germs are too valuable to be wasted on mere lumber yards and fruit packeries and grain elevators and the like."

"You'll meet her some day," laughed the boss, with a sort of happy lilt in his voice that fairly made me sick—knowing what I did; and knowing that he didn't know it. Then he switched the subject abruptly: "About the other matter, Ripley: I know you've been pretty busy, but you've had Tarbell nearly a week. What have you found out?"

"We've gone into it pretty thoroughly, and I think we've got at the bottom of it, finally. I can tell you the whole story now."

The boss got up, closed the door leading to May's room, and snapped the catch against interruptions.

"Let's have it," he directed.

Ripley briefed the general situation as it stood on

the night of the engine theft in a few terse sentences. Aside from the fight on Red Tower Consolidated, the new railroad policies were threatening to upset all the time-honored political traditions of the machine-governed State. An election was approaching, and the railroad vote and influence must be whipped into line. As the grafters viewed it, the threatened revolution was a one-man government, and if that man could be removed the danger would vanish.

Beyond that, he gave the story of the facts, so far as they had been ferreted out by Tarbell. The orders had apparently come from political headquarters in the State capital, but the execution details had been turned over to Clanahan, the political boss of Portal City. Clanahan's gangsters and crooks had been at work for some time before the plot climaxed. They had tapped our wires and were thus enabled to intercept our messages and keep in touch.

The plot itself was simple. At a certain hour of a given night an anonymous letter was to be sent to Mr. Norcross, telling him that a gang of noted train robbers was stealing an engine from the Portal City yard for the purpose of running down the line and wrecking the Fast Mail, which often carried a bullion express-car. If the boss should fall for it—as he did, when the time came—and go in person to stop the raid, he was to be overpowered and spirited away, a forged letter purporting to be a notice of his

resignation was to be left for Mr. Van Britt, and a fake telegram, making the same announcement, was to be sent to President Dunton in New York. Nothing was left indefinite but the choosing of the night.

"I suppose Hatch was to give the word," said the boss, who had been listening soberly while the lawyer talked.

"That is the inference. Any night when you were in town would answer. The engine to be stolen was the one which brings the Strathcona accommodation in at eight-thirty each evening, and which always stands overnight in the same place—on the spur below the coal chutes. Hence, it was always available. Hatch probably gave the word after his talk with you, but the time was made even more propitious by the arrival of the two telegrams; the one from Mr. Chadwick, and the one from Mr. Dunton, both of which they doubtless intercepted by means of the tapped wires."

Mr. Norcross looked up quickly.

"Ripley, did Dunton know what was going to be done to me?"

"Oh, I think not. It wasn't at all necessary that he should be taken in on it. He has been opposing your policies all along, and had just sent you a pretty savage call-down. He didn't want you in the first place, and he has been anxious to get rid of you ever

since. The plotters knew very well what he would do if he should get a wire which purported to be your resignation. He would appoint another man, quick, and all they would have to do would be to make sure that you were well off stage, and would stay off until the other man could take hold."

"It worked out like a charm," admitted the boss, with a wry smile. "I haven't been talking much about the details, partly because I wanted to find out if this young fellow, Tarbell, was as good as the major's recommendation of him, and partly because I'm honestly ashamed, Ripley. Any man of my age and experience who would swallow bait, hook, and line as I did that night deserves to get all that is coming to him."

"You can tell me now, can't you?" queried the attorney.

"Oh, yes; you have it all—or practically all. I fell for the anonymous letter about the Mail hold-up, and while I don't 'rattle' very easily, ordinarily, that was one time when I lost my head, just for the moment. The obvious thing to do—if any attention whatever was to be paid to the anonymous warning—was to telephone the police and the round-house. I did neither because I thought it might be too slow. The letter was urgent, of course; it said that Black Ike Bradley and his gang were already in the railroad yard, preparing to steal the engine."

"So you made a straight shoot for the scene of action?"

"I did; down the back streets and across the lower end of the plaza. As it appeared—or rather as it was made to appear—I was barely in time. There were men at the engine, and when I sprinted across the yard they were ready to move it out to the main line. I yelled at them and ran in."

"You must have been beautifully rattled; to go up against a gang of thugs that way, alone and unarmed," was the lawyer's comment.

"I was," the boss confessed soberly. "Of course, I didn't have a ghost of a show. Three of them tackled me the moment I came within reach. I got one of the three on the point of the jaw, and they had to leave him behind; but there were enough more of them. Before I fairly realized what was happening, they had me trussed up like a Christmas turkey, gagged with my own handkerchief, and loaded into the cab of the engine. From that on, it was all plain sailing."

"Then they took you to the old lumber camp?"

"As fast as the engine could be made to turn her wheels. They were running against the Mail, and they knew it. Arroyo has no night operator, and when we sneaked through the Banta yard and past the station, the operator there was asleep. I saw

him, with his head in the crook of his arm, at the telegraph table in the bay window as we passed."

Ripley grinned. "We've been giving that young fellow the third degree—Van Britt and I. He claims that he was doped; that somebody dropped something into his supper coffee at the station lunch counter. His story didn't hang together and Van Britt fired him. But go on."

"We ran out to the Timber Mountain 'Y'," the boss resumed, "and from that on up the old saw-mill line. The rail connections were all in place, and I knew from this that preparations had been made beforehand. At the mill stop they untied my legs and made me walk up the hill to the commissary. When they took the gag out, I said a few things and asked them what they were going to do with me. They wouldn't tell me anything except that I was to be locked up for a few days."

"You knew what that meant?"

"Perfectly. My drop-out would be made to look as if I had jumped the job, and Dunton would appoint a new man. After that, I could come back, if I wanted to. Whatever I might do or try to do would cut no figure, and no explanation I could make would be believed. I had most obligingly dug my own official grave, and there could be no resurrection."

"What then?" pressed Ripley, keenly interested, as anybody could see.

"When they took the clothes-line from my arms there was another scrap. It didn't do any good. They got the door shut on me and got it locked. After that, for four solid days, Ripley, I was made to realize how little it takes to hold a man. I had my pocket-knife, but I couldn't whittle my way out. The floor puncheons were spiked down, and I couldn't dig out. They had taken all my matches, and I couldn't burn the place. I tried the stick-rubbing, and all those things you read about: they're fakes; I couldn't get even the smell of smoke."

"The chimney?"

"There wasn't any. They had heated the place, when it was a commissary, with a stove, and the pipe hole through the ceiling had a piece of sheet iron nailed over it. And I couldn't get to the roof at all. They had me."

Ripley nodded and said, snappy-like: "Well, we've got them now—any time you give the word. Tarbell has a pinch on one of the Clanahan men and he will turn State's evidence. We can railroad every one of those fellows who carried you off."

"And the men higher up?" queried the boss.

"No; not yet."

"Then we'll drop it right where it is. I don't

want the hired tools; no one of them, unless you can get the devil that crippled Jimmie Dodds, here."

They went on, talking about my burn-up. Listening in, I learned for the first time just how it had been done. Tarbell, through his hold upon the welshing Clanahan striker, had got the details at second-hand. Hatch's assassin—or Clanahan's—must have had it all doped out and made ready before Hatch had made the break at trying to bribe me.

Anyway, a lead had been taken from a power wire at the corner of the street and hooked over the outer door-knob. And inside I had been given a sheet of copper to stand on for a good "ground," the copper itself being wired to a water pipe running up through the hall. Tarbell had afterward proved up on all this, it seemed, finding the insulated wire and the copper sheet with its connections hidden in a small rubbish closet under the hall stair, just where a fellow in a hurry might chuck them.

"Tarbell is a striking success," Mr. Norcross put in, along at the end of things. "We'll keep him on with us, Ripley."

"You'd better," said the level-eyed young attorney, significantly. "From the way things are stacking up, you'll presently need a personal body-guard. I suppose it's no use asking you to carry a gun?"

"Hardly," laughed the boss. "I've never done it yet, and it's pretty late in the day to begin."

Past this there was a little more talk about the C. S. & W. deal, and about what the Hatch crowd would be likely to try next; and when it was finished, and Ripley was reaching for his hat, the boss said: "There is no change in the orders: we've got 'em going now, and we'll keep 'em going. Drive it, Ripley; drive it for every ounce there is in you. Never mind the election talk or the stock quotations. This railroad is going to be honest, if it never earns another net dollar. We'll win!"

"It's beginning to look a little that way, now," the lawyer admitted, with his hand on the door knob. "Just the same, Norcross, there is safety in numbers, and our numbers are precisely one; one man"—holding up a single finger. "As before, the pyramid is standing on its head—and you are the head. The other people have shown us once what happens when you are removed. For God's sake, be careful!"

I don't know whether the boss took that last bit of advice to heart or not. If he didn't, he was a bigger man than even I had been taking him for—with the crooks of a whole State reaching out for him, and with the knowledge which he must have had, that the next time they came gunning for him they'd shoot to kill.

It was late in the afternoon when Ripley made his visit, and pretty soon after he went away the boss and I closed up our end of the shop and left May

pecking away at his typewriter on a lot of routine stuff. I don't know what made me do it, but as I was passing Fred's desk on the way out, stringing along behind the boss, I stopped and jerked open one of the drawers. I knew beforehand what was in the drawer, and pointed to it—a new .38 automatic. Fred nodded, and I slipped the gun into my left-hand pocket, wondering as I did it, if I could make out to hit the broad side of a barn, shooting with that hand, if I had to.

A half-minute later I had caught up with Mr. Norcross, and together we left the building and went up to the Bullard for dinner.

XVI

In the Coal Yard

I KNEW, just as well as could be—without being able to prove it—that we were shadowed on the trip up from the railroad building to the hotel, and it made me nervous. There could be only one reason now for any such dogging of the boss. The grafters were not trying to find out what he was doing; they didn't need to, because he was advertising his doings—or Juneman was—in the newspapers. What they were trying to do was to catch him off his guard and do him up—this time to stay done up.

It was safe to assume that they wouldn't fumble the ball a second time. Mr. Ripley had stood the thing fairly on its feet when he said that our campaign was purely a one-man proposition, so far as it had yet gone. People who had met the boss and had done business with him liked him; but the old-time prejudice against the railroad was so widespread and so bitter that it couldn't be overcome all at once. Juneman, our publicity man, was doing his best, but as yet we had no party following in the State at large which would stand by us and see that we got justice.

I was chewing these things over while we sat at dinner in the Bullard café, and I guess Mr. Norcross was, too, for he didn't say much. It isn't altogether comfortable to be a marked man in a more or less unfriendly country, and I shouldn't wonder if the boss, big and masterful as he was, felt the pressure of it. I don't know whether he knew anything about the shadowing business I speak of or not, but he might have. We hadn't more than given our dinner order when one of Hatch's clerks, a cock-eyed chap named Kestler, came in and took a table just far enough from ours to be out of the way, and near enough to listen in if we said anything.

When we finished, Kestler was just getting his service of ice-cream; but I noticed that he left it untouched and got up and followed us to the lobby. It made me hot enough to want to turn on him and knock his crooked eye out, but of course, that wouldn't have done any good.

After Mr. Norcross had bought some cigars at the stand he said he guessed he'd run out to Major Kendrick's for a little while; and with that he went up to his rooms. Though the major was the one he named, I knew he meant that he was going to see Mrs. Sheila. I remembered what he had said to Ripley about a woman's giving him germ ideas and such things, and I guess it was really so. Every time he spent an evening at the major's he'd come

back with a lot of new notions for popularizing the Short Line.

When he said that, about going out to the major's, Kestler was near enough to overhear it, and so he waited, lounging in the lobby and pretending to read a paper. About half-past seven the boss came down and asked me to call a taxi for him. I did it; and Kestler loafed around just long enough to see him start off. Then he lit out, himself, and something in the way he did it made me take out after him.

I expected to see him turn up-town to the second cross street where the Red Tower had its general offices on the fourth floor of the Empire Building. But instead, he turned the other way, and the first thing I knew I was trailing him through the railroad yard and on down past the freight house toward the big, fenced-in, Red Tower coal yards.

At the coal yard he let himself in through a wicket in the wagon gates, and I noticed that he used a key and locked the wicket after he got inside. I put my eye to a crack in the high stockade fence and saw that the little shack office that was used for a scale-house was lighted up. My burnt hand was healing tolerably well by this time and I could use it a little. There was a slack pile just outside of the big gate, and by climbing to the top of it I got over the fence and crept up to the scale-house.

A small window in one end of the shack, opened

about two inches at the bottom, answered well enough for a peep-hole. Three men were in the little box of a place—three besides Kestler; Hatch, his barrel-bodied partner, Henckel, and one other. The third man looked like a glorified barkeep'. He was of the type I have heard called "black Irish," fat, sleek, and well-fed, with little pin-point black eyes half buried in the flesh of his round face, and the padded jaw and double chin shaved to the blue. The night was warm and he had his hat off. Through the crack in the window I could smell the pomatum with which his hair was plastered into barkeep' waves to match the tightly curled black mustaches.

I knew this third man well enough, by sight; everybody in Portal City knew him—decent people only too well when it came to an election tussle. He was the redoubtable Pete Clanahan, dive-keeper, and political boss.

Kestler was talking when I glued eye and ear to the window crack; was telling the three how he had shadowed Mr. Norcross from the railroad headquarters to the Bullard, and how he stayed around until he had seen the boss take a taxi for Major Kendrick's. This seemed to be all that was wanted of him, for when he was through, Hatch told him he might go home. After the cock-eyed clerk was gone, Hatch lighted a fresh cigar and put it squarely up to the Irishman.

"It's no use being mealy-mouthed over this thing, Pete," he grated in that saw-mill voice of his. "We've got to get rid of this man. You've asked us to shadow him and keep you posted, and we have —and you've done nothing. Every day's delay gives him that much better hold. We can choke him off by littles in the business game, of course; we have Dunton and the New Yorkers on our side, and this coöperative scheme he has launched can be broken down with money. Such things never hold together very long. But that doesn't help you political people out; and your stake in the game is even bigger than ours."

Clanahan looked around the little dog-kennel of a place suspiciously.

" 'Tis not here that we can talk much about thim things, Misther Hatch," he said cautiously.

"Why not?" was the rasping question. "There's nobody in the yard, and the gates are locked. It's a damned sight safer than a back room in one of your dives—as we know now to our cost."

Clanahan threw up his head with a gesture that said much. "Murphy's the man that leaked on that engine job—and he'll leak no more."

"Well," said Hatch, with growing irritation, "what are you holding back for now? We stood to win on the first play, and we would have won if your people hadn't balled it by talking too much.

One more day and Dismuke would have been in the saddle. That would have settled it."

"Yah; and Mister Dismuke still here in Portal City remains," put in Henckel.

The dive-keeper locked his pudgy fingers across a cocked knee.

" 'Tis foine, brave gintlemen ye are, you two, whin ye've got somebody else to pull th' nuts out av th' fire for ye!" he said. "Ye'd have us croak this felly f'r ye, and thin ye'd stand back and wash yer hands while some poor divil wint to th' rope f'r it. Where do we come in, is what I'd like to know?"

"You are already in," snapped Hatch. "You know what the Big Fellow at the capital thinks about it, and where you'll stand in the coming election if you don't put out this fire that Norcross is kindling. You're yellow, Clanahan. That's all that is the matter with you. Put your wits to work. There are more ways of killing a cat than by choking it to death with butter."

"Tell me wan thing!" insisted the dive-keeper, boring the chief grafter with his pin-point eyes. "Do you stand f'r it if we do this thing up right?"

Hatch's eyes fell, and Henckel's big body twisted uneasily in the chair that was groaning under his beer-barrel weight. There was silence for a little space, and I could feel the cold sweat starting out all over me. I hadn't dreamed of stumbling upon any-

thing like this when I started out to shadow Kestler. They were actually plotting to murder the boss!

It was Hatch who broke the stillness.

"It's up to you, Clanahan, and you know it," he declared. "You've had your tip from the Big Fellow. The railroad people must be made to get into the fight in the coming election, and get in on the right side. If they don't; and if Norcross stays and keeps his fire burning; you fellows lose out. So shall we; but what we lose will be a mere drop in the bucket; and, as I have said, we stand to get it back, after this coöperative scheme has had time to burn itself out."

Clanahan sat back in his chair and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Ye'd sthring me as if I was a boy!" he scoffed. "'Tis your own game fr'm first to last. D'ye think I'm not knowing that? 'Tis bread and butther and th' big rake-off for you, and little ye care how th' election goes. Suppose we'd croak this man in th' hot par-rt av th' p'litical fight; what happens? Half th' noospaypers in th' State 'd play him up f'r a martyr to th' cause av good governmint, and we'd all go to hell in a hand-basket!"

I was cramped and sore and one of my legs had gone to sleep, but I couldn't have moved if I had wanted to. My heart was skipping beats right along while I waited for Hatch's answer. When it came,

the drumming in my ears pretty nearly made me lose it.

"Clanahan," he began, as cold as an icicle. "I didn't get you down here to argue with you. We've got your number—all your different numbers—and they are written down in a book. You've bungled this thing once, and for that reason you've got it to do over again. We haven't asked you to 'croak' anybody, as you put it, and we are not asking it now."

"'Tis domned little you lack av asking it," retorted the dive-keeper.

"Listen," said Hatch, leaning forward with his hands on his knees. "Besides keeping cases on Norcross here, we've been digging back into his record a few lines. Every man has his sore spot, if you can only find it, Clanahan—just as you have yours. What if I should tell you that Norcross is wanted in another State—for a crime?"

"Nobody would believe ut," was the prompt rejoinder. "If he's wanted he c'u'd be had."

"Wait," Hatch went on. "Before he came here he was chief of construction on the Oregon Midland. There was a right-of-way fight back in the mountains—fifty miles from the nearest sheriff—with the P. & S. F. Norcross armed his track-layers, and in the bluffing there was a man killed."

Though it was a warm night, as I have said, the

cold chills began to chase themselves up and down my back. What Hatch said was perfectly true. In the right-of-way scrap he was talking about, there had been a few wild shots fired, and one of them had found a P. & S. F. grade laborer. I don't believe anybody had ever really blamed the boss for it. He had given strict orders that we were only to make a show of force; and, besides, the other fellows were armed, too, and had armed first. But there *had* been a man killed.

While I was shivering, Clanahan said: "Well, what av it?"

"Norcross was responsible for that man's death. If he was having trouble over his right-of-way, his recourse was to the law, and he took the law into his own hands. Nothing was ever done about it, because nobody took the trouble to prosecute. A week ago we sent a man to Oregon to look up the facts. He succeeded in finding a brother of the dead man, and a warrant has now been sworn out for Norcross's arrest."

"Well?" said Clanahan again. "Ye have the sthring in yer own hand; why don't ye pull it?"

"That's where you come in," was the answer. "The Oregon justice issued the warrant because it was demanded, but he refused to incur, for his county, the expense of sending a deputy sheriff to another State, or to take the necessary steps to have

Norcross extradited. If Norcross could be produced in court, he would try him and either discharge him or bind him over, as the facts might warrant. He took his stand upon the ground that Norcross was only technically responsible, and told the brother that in all probability nothing would come of an attempt to prosecute."

"Thin ye've got nothing on him, after all," the Irishman grunted.

"Yes," Hatch came back; "we have the warrant, and, in addition to that, we have you, Pete. A word from you to the Portal City police headquarters, and our man finds himself arrested and locked up—to wait for a requisition from the Governor of Oregon."

"But you said th' requisition wouldn't come," Clanahan put in.

Hatch was sitting back now and stroking his ugly jaw.

"It might come, Pete, if it had to: there's no knowing. In the meantime we get delay. There'll be *habeas corpus* proceedings, of course, to get him out of jail, but there's where you'll come in again; you've got your own man in for City Attorney. And, after all, the delay is all we need. With Norcross in trouble, and in jail on a charge of murder, the railroad ship'll go on the rocks in short order. The Norcross management is having plenty of trouble—

wrecks and the like. With Norcross locked up, New York will be heard from, and Dismuke will step in and clean house. That will wind up the reform spasm."

"'Tis a small chance," growled the chief of the ward healers. "Th' high-brow vote is stirrin', and there'll be some to say it's persecution—and say it where it'll be heard. I'll talk it over with the Big Fellow."

Again Hatch leaned forward and put his hands on his knees.

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Pete. You'll act, and act on your own responsibility. If you don't, somebody may wire the sheriff of Silver Bow County, Montana, that the man he knew in Butte as Michael Clancy is. . . ."

The dive-keeper put up both hands as if to ward off a blow.

"'Tis enough," he mumbled, speaking as if he had a bunch of dry cotton in his mouth. "Slip me th' warrant."

Hatch went to a small safe and worked the combination. When the door was opened he passed a folded paper to Clanahan. Through all this talk, Henckel had said nothing, and I suspected that Hatch had him there solely for safety's sake, and to provide a witness. With the paper in his pocket,

Clanahan got up to go. It was time for me to make a move.

It's curious how an idea will sometimes lay hold of you and knock out reason and common sense and everything else. Clanahan had in his pocket a piece of paper that simply meant ruin to Mr. Norcross, and the blowing up of all the plans that had been made and all the work that had been done. If he should be allowed to get up town with that warrant, the end of everything would be in sight. But how was I to prevent it?

I saw where the Irishman had put the warrant; in the right-hand, outside pocket of his coat. The pocket wasn't deep enough, and about an inch of the folded paper showed white against the black of his coat. The three men were on their feet, and Hatch was reaching for the wall switch which controlled the single incandescent lamp hanging from the ceiling of the scale-house. If I could only think of some way to blow the place up and snatch the paper in the confusion.

Up to that minute I had never thought once of the pistol I had taken from Fred May's drawer, though it was still sagging in my left hip pocket. When I did think of it I dragged it out with some silly notion of trying to hold the three men up at the door of the shack as they came out. Hatch's stop to light a cigar and to hand out a couple to the other

two gave me time to chuck that notion and grab another. With the muzzle of the automatic resting in the crack of the opened window I took dead aim at the incandescent lamp in the ceiling and turned her loose for the whole magazineful.

Since the first bullet got the lamp and left the place black dark, I couldn't see what was happening in the close little room. But whatever it was, there was plenty of it. I could hear them gasping and yelling and knocking one another down as they fought to get the door open. Sticking the empty pistol back into my pocket I jumped to get action, hurting my sore hand like the mischief in doing it.

Hatch was the first man out, but the big German was so close a second that he knocked his smaller partner down and fell over him. Clanahan kept his feet. He had a gun in his hand that looked to me, in the darkness, as big as a cannon. I was flattened against the side of the scale shack, and when the dive-keeper tried to side-step around the two fallen men who were blocking the way, I snatched the folded paper from his pocket; snatched it and ran as if the dickens was after me.

That was a bad move—the runaway. If I had kept still there might have been a chance for me to make a sneak. But when I ran, and fell over a pile of loose coal, and got up and ran again, they were

all three after me, Clanahan taking blind shots in the dark with his cannon as he came.

Naturally, I made straight for the wagon gate, and forgot, until I was right there, that it, and the wicket through one of the leaves, were both locked. As I shook the wicket, a bullet from Clanahan's gun spatted into the woodwork and stuck a splinter into my hand, and I turned and sprinted again, this time for the gates where the coal cars were pushed in from the railroad yard. These, too, were shut and locked, and when I ducked under the nearest gondola I realized that I was trapped. Before I could climb the high fence anywhere, they'd get me.

They came up, all three of them, puffing and blowing, while I was hiding under the gondola.

"It's probably that cow-boy spotter of Norcross's, but he can't get away," Hatch was gritting—meaning Tarbell, probably. "The gates are locked and we can plug him if he tries to climb the fence. There's a gun in the scale-house. You two look under these cars while I go and get it!

It was up to me to move again. Henckel was striking matches and holding them so that Clanahan could look under the cars, and I could feel, in anticipation, the shock of a bullet from the big gun in the dive-keeper's fat fist as I crawled cautiously out on the far side. Creeping along behind the string of coal cars I came presently to the great gantry

crane used for unloading the fuel. It was a huge traveling machine, straddling the tracks and a good part of the yard, and the clam-shell grab-bucket was down, resting on its two lips on the ground.

At first I thought of climbing to the frame-work of the crane and trying to hide on the big bridge beam. Then I saw that the two halves of the clam-shell bucket were slightly open, just wide enough to let me squeeze in. If they were looking for a full-sized man—Tarbell, for instance, who was as husky as a farm-hand—they'd never think of that crack in the bucket; and in another second I had wriggled through the V-shaped opening and was sitting humped up in one of the halves of the clam-shell.

That was a mighty good guess. When Hatch came back with his gun, they combed that coal yard with a fine-tooth comb, using a lantern that Hatch had gotten from somewhere and missing no hole or corner where a man might hide, save and excepting only the one I had preempted.

As it happened, the search wound up finally under the crane, with the three standing so near that I could have reached out of the crack between the bucket halves and touched them.

"Der tuyfel has gone mit himself ofer der fence, yes?" puffed Henckel. And then: "Vot for iss he shoot off dem pistols, ennahow?"

Clanahan confessed, I suppose because he knew he would have to, sooner or later.

"It was a hold-up," he growled. "Th' warrant's gone out av my pocket."

Hatch's comment on this was fairly blood-curdling in its profanity. And I could see, in imagination, just how he thrust that bad jaw of his out when he whirled upon the Irishman.

"Then it's up to you to get him some other way, you blundering son of a thief!" he raged. "I don't care what you do, but if you don't make this country too hot to hold him, it's going to get too hot to hold you!" And what more he was going to say, I don't know, for at that moment a belated police patrol began pounding at the gates on the town side and wanting to know what all the shooting was about.

It was after they had all gone away, leaving the big coal yard in silence and darkness, that I got mine, good and hard. Sitting all bunched up in the grab-bucket and waiting for my chance to climb out and make a get-away, the common sense reaction came and saw what I had done. With the best intentions in the world, in trying to kill off the chance offered to the enemy by the Oregon warrant and the trumped-up charge of murder, I had merely saved the boss an arrest and a possible legal tangle and had put him in peril of his life.

XVII

The Man at the Window

OF course, the first thing I did, the morning after that adventure in the coal yard, was to tell the boss all about it, and I was just foxy enough to do it when Mr. Ripley was present. Mr. Norcross didn't say much; and, for that matter, neither did the lawyer, though he did ask the boss a question or two about the real facts in the Midland right-of-way squabble.

But I noticed, after that, that our man Tarbell was continually turning up at all sorts of times, and in all sorts of odd places, so I took it that Ripley had given him his tip, and that he was sort of body-guarding Mr. Norcross on the quiet, though I am sure the boss didn't know anything about that part of it—he was such a square fighter himself that he probably wouldn't have stood for it if he had.

Meanwhile, things grew warmer and warmer in the tussle we were making to pull the old Short Line out of the mud; warmer in a number of ways, because, in addition to the fight for the public confidence, we began just then to have a perfect epidemic of wrecks.

The boss turned the material trouble over to Mr. Van Britt and devoted himself pretty strictly to the public side of things. Everywhere, and on every occasion—at dinners at the different chambers of commerce, and public banquets given to this, that, or the other visiting big-wig—he was always ready to get on his feet and tell the people that the true prosperity of the country carried with it the prosperity of the railroads; that the two things were one and inseparable; and that, when it came right down to basic facts, the railroads were really a part of the progress machinery of the country at large and should be regarded, not as alien tax-collectors, but as contributors to the general prosperity and welfare.

I went with him on a good many of the trips he made to be "among those present" at these gatherings—and so, by the way, did Tarbell—and it was plain to be seen that the new idea was gradually gathering a little headway. By this time, also, Red Tower Consolidated was beginning to find out what it meant to have active competition. The C. S. & W. people were hammering their new plants into working shape, and they were getting the patronage, both of the producers and consumers, hand over fist.

Engineered by Billoughby, the railroad was simply playing the part of the good big brother to these new middlemen. Track facilities and yard service

were granted freely; and while no discrimination was permitted as against the Red Tower people, the friendly attitude of the road counted for something, as it was bound to; hence, the C. S. & W. got the business right from the jump, enlarging its field as it went along, and gathering in all the little side monopolies like the ice-plants, and city lighting installations, and so on. This, by the way, was in line with the new slogan put out by the boss and his boosters: "Own your own Utilities."

As to the political struggle which was now ripping the State wide open from end to end, the boss was steel and iron on the side of non-interference. He never allowed himself to say a public word on either side; never spoke of the campaign at all except to assert everywhere and at all times that the railroad was not in politics, and never would be again.

This was the key-word given to the different members of the staff to be passed on down the line to every official in authority. We were to be like Cæsar's wife—above suspicion. We were neither to make nor meddle in the campaign, and any department head or other officer or employee caught trying to swing the railroad vote would be fired on the spot.

On one of our trips over the road we had a call from Mr. Anson Burrell, the gubernatorial candidate who was making the race against the

machine. He was a cattle magnate of the modern sort; a big, viking-looking man, with a Yale degree, and with a record as clean as a hound's tooth. When he came into the private car he seemed to fill it, not only with his presence, but with the fresh keen air of the grazing uplands.

"I'm glad to have a chance to meet you on your own ground, Mr. Norcross," he said, giving the boss a hand-grip that looked mighty hearty and sincere. "I've been waiting for an opportunity to tell you how much we appreciate the stand you have taken. For the first time in its history, the railroad is keeping out of the political fight; I know it, and the people are beginning to find it out, too. You may not mean it that way, but it is the strongest card you could play. You need just legislation, and there is no better way to get it than by not trying to influence it."

The boss met him half-way on that, of course, and said what he ought to; and they talked along that line for the full half-hour that our special stopped in the town where Mr. Burrell had caught us. In a way, it was a sort of temptation to take sides. Mr. Burrell made it pretty plain that if the railroad continued to behave itself, and if the reform party got in, there would be easier legislation, and perhaps some of the old hard-and-fast intra-state rate laws repealed. But the boss wasn't the man

to drop his candy in the dirt, and he kept right on laying down the law to everybody in the service; we were to let the campaign absolutely alone, and every man was to vote as he thought best.

As time went on, I was a little surprised to see that Hatch and his gunmen side partners under Pete Clanahan made no further move; at least, not toward keeping cases on Mr. Norcross. Though Tarbell and I still went everywhere with him, we saw no more shadowers. I put it up that perhaps they were lying quiet because they knew that somebody had overheard their talk in the coal yard scale-house and they were waiting for the thing to blow over a little. All of us who were on the inside felt that the move was only postponed, and that when it did come it would be a center shot. But there was nothing we could do. We could only hang on and keep a sharp eye to windward.

During those few pre-election weeks the New York end of us seemed to have petered out completely. We heard nothing more from President Dunton, worse than an occasional wire complaint about the number of wrecks we were having, though the stock was still going down, point by point, and, so far as a man up a tree could see, we were making no attempt to show net earnings—were turning all our money into betterments as fast as it came in. I knew that couldn't go on. Without a flurry of some

sort, the New Yorkers would never be able to break even, to say nothing of a profit, and I looked every day for a howl that would tear things straight up the back.

While all these threads were weaving along, I'm sorry to say that I hadn't yet drummed up the courage to tell the boss the truth about Mrs. Sheila. He kept on going to the major's every chance he had, and Maisie Ann was making life miserable for me because I hadn't told him—calling me a coward and everything under the sun. I told her to tell him herself, and she retorted that I knew she couldn't: that it was my job and nobody else's. We fussed over it a lot; and because I most always contrived some excuse to chase out to the Kendrick house at the boss's heels—merely to help Tarbell keep cases on him—there were plenty of chances for the fussing.

It was on one of these chasing trips to "Kenwood" that the roof fell in. The major had gone out somewhere—to the theater, I guess—taking his wife and Maisie Ann, and the boss and Mrs. Sheila were sitting together in the major's den, with a little coal blaze in the basket grate because the nights were beginning to get a bit chilly.

As usual when they were together, they made no attempt at privacy: the den doorway had no door, nothing but one of those Japanese curtains made

out of bits of bamboo strung like beads on a lot of strings. I had butted in with a telegram—which might just as well have stood over until the next morning, if you want to know. After I had delivered it, Mrs. Sheila gave me that funny little laugh of hers and told me to go hunt in the pantry and see if I could find a piece of pie, and the boss added that if I'd wait, he'd go back to town with me pretty soon.

I found the pie, and ate it in the dining-room, making noise enough about it so that they could know I was there if they wanted to. But they went right on talking, and paid no attention to me.

"Do you know, Sheila"—they had long since got past the "Mr." and "Mrs."—"you've been the greatest possible help to me in this rough-house, all the way along," the boss was saying. "And I don't understand how you, or any woman, can plan so clearly and logically to a purely business end. I was just thinking to-night as I came out here: you have given me nearly every suggestion I have had that was worth anything; more than that, you have held me up to the rack, time and again, when I have been ready to throw it all up and let go. Why have you done it?"

I heard the little laugh again, and she said: "It is worth something to have a friend. Odd as it may seem, Graham, I have been singularly poverty-

stricken in that respect. And I have wanted to see you succeed. Though you are still calling it merely a 'business deal,' it is really a mission, you know, crammed full of good things to a struggling world. If you do succeed—and I am sure you are going to —you will leave this community, and hundreds of others, vastly the better for what you are doing and demonstrating."

"But that is a man's point of view," the boss persisted. "How do you get it? You are all woman, you know; and your mixing and mingling—at least, since I have known you—has all been purely social. How do you get the big overlook?"

"I don't know. I was foolish and frivolous once, like most young girls, I suppose. But we all grow older; and we ought to grow wiser. Besides, the woman has the advantage of the man in one respect; she has time to think and plan and reason things out as a busy man can't have. Your problem has seemed very simple to me, from the very beginning. It asked only for a strong man and an honest one. You were to take charge of a piece of property that had been abused and knocked about and used as a means of extortion and oppression, and you were to make it good."

"Again, that is a man's point of view."

"Oh, no," she protested quickly. "There is no sex in ethics. Women are the natural house-

cleaners, perhaps, but that isn't saying that a man can't be one, too, if he wants to be."

At this, the boss got up and began to tramp up and down the room; I could hear him. I knew she'd been having the biggest kind of a job to keep him shut up in this sort of abstract corral, when all the time he was loving her fit to kill, but apparently she had been doing it, successfully. There wasn't the faintest breath of sentiment in the air; not the slightest whiff. When she began again, I could somehow feel that she was just in time to prevent his breaking out into all sorts of love-making. I shouldn't wonder if that was the way it had been from the beginning.

"The time has come, now, when you must take another leaf out of my book," she said, with just the proper little cooling tang in her voice. "Up to the present you have been hammering your way to the end like a strong man, and that was right. But you have been more or less reckless—and that isn't right or fair or just to a lot of other people."

The tramping stopped and I heard him say: "I don't know what you mean."

"I mean that matters have come to such a pass now that you can't afford to take any risks—personal risks. The enmity that caused you to be kidnapped and carried away into the mountains still exists, and exists in even greater measure. It hasn't

stopped fighting you for a single minute, and if the plan it is now trying doesn't work, it will try another and a more desperate one."

"You've been talking to Ripley," he laughed. "Ripley wants me to become a gun-toter and provide myself with a body-guard. I'd look well, wouldn't I? But what do you mean by 'the plan it is now trying'?"

She hesitated a little, and then said: "I shall make no charges, because I have no proof. But I read the newspapers, and Mr. Van Britt tells me something, now and then. You are having a terrible lot of wrecks."

"That is merely bad luck," he rejoined easily, adding: "And the wrecks have nothing to do with my personal safety."

"Rashness is no part of true courage," she interpolated, calmly. "As a private individual you might say that your life is your own, and that you have a perfect right to risk it as you please. But as the general manager of the railroad, with a lot of your friends holding office under you, you can't say that. Besides, you are fighting for a cause, and that cause will stand or fall with you."

"You ought to be a member of this new reform legislature that some of our good friends think is coming up the pike," he chuckled; but she ignored the good-natured gibe and made him listen.

"I was visiting a day or two at the capital last week, and there are influences at work that you don't know about. It has grown away past and beyond any mere fight with the Hatch people. If the opposition can't make your administration a failure, it won't hesitate to get rid of you in the easiest way that offers."

There was silence in the major's den for a minute or so, and then the boss said:

"As usual, you know more than you are willing to tell me."

"Perhaps not," was the prompt answer. "Perhaps I am only the onlooker—who can usually see things rather better than the persons actually involved. Hitherto I have urged you to be bold, and then again to be bold. Now I am begging you to be prudent."

"In what way?"

"Careful for yourself. For example: you walked out here this evening; don't do that any more. Come in a taxi—and don't come alone."

I couldn't see his frown of disagreement, but I knew well enough it was there.

"There spoke the woman in you," he said. "If I should show the white feather that way, they'd have some excuse for potting me."

There was a silence again, and I got up quietly and crossed the dining-room to the big recessed

window where I stood looking out into the darkness of the tree-shaded lawn. It was pretty evident that Mrs. Sheila knew a heap more than she was telling the boss, just as he had said, and I couldn't help wondering how she came to know it. What she said about the increased number of wrecks looked like a pointer. Was she in touch with the enemy in some way?

I knew that Major Kendrick heard all the gossip of the streets and the clubs, and that he carried a good bit of it home; but that wouldn't account for much inside knowledge of the real thing in Mrs. Sheila. Then my mind went back in a flash to what Maisie Ann had told me. Was the husband who ought to be dead, and wasn't, mixed up in it in any way? Could it be possible that he was one of those who were in the fight on the other side, and that she was still keeping in touch with him?

Pretty soon I heard the murmur of their voices again, but now I was so far away from the bamboo-screened door that I couldn't hear what they were saying. I wished they would break it off so the boss could go. It was getting late, and there had been enough said to make me wish we were both safely back in the hotel. It's that way sometimes, you know, in spite of all you can do. You hear a talk, and you can't help reading between the lines. I knew, as well as I knew that I was alive, that Mrs.

Sheila meant more than she had said: perhaps more than she had dared to say.

It was while I was standing there in the big window, sweating over the way the talk in the other room was dragging itself out, that I saw the man on the lawn. At first I thought it was Tarbell, who was never very far out of reach when the boss was running loose. But the next minute I saw I was mistaken. The man under the trees looked as if he might be an English tourist. He had on a long traveling coat that came nearly to his heels, and his cap was the kind that has two visors, one in front and the other behind.

Realizing that it wasn't Tarbell, I stood perfectly still. The house was lighted with gas, and the dining-room chandelier had been turned down, so there was a chance that the skulker under the trees wouldn't see me standing in the corner of the box window. To make it surer, I edged away until the curtain hid me. I was just in time. The man had crept out of his hiding-place and was coming up to the window on the outside. As he passed through the dim beam of light thrown by the turned-down chandelier, I saw that he had a pistol in his hand, or a weapon of some kind; anyway, I caught the glint of the gas-light on dull steel.

That stirred me up good and plenty. I still had the gun I had taken out of Fred May's drawer; I

had carried it ever since the night when it had mighty nearly got me killed off in the Red Tower coal yard. I fished it out and made ready, thinking, of course, that the skulker must certainly be one of Clanahan's gunmen. I still had that idea when I felt, rather than saw, that the man was pulling himself up to the window so that he could take a look into the dining-room.

The look satisfied him, apparently, for the next second I heard him drop among the bushes; and when I stood up and looked out again I could just make him out going around toward the back of the house. Thanks to Maisie Ann and the pantry excursions, I knew the house like a book, and without making any noise about it I slipped through the butler's pantry and got a look out of a rear window. My man was there, and he was working his way sort of blindly around to the den side of the place.

I guess maybe I ought to have given the alarm. But I knew there was only one window in the major's den room, and that was nearly opposite the screened doorway. So I ducked back into the dining-room and took a stand where I could see the one window through the door-curtain net-work of bamboo beads. I was so excited that I caught only snatches of what Mrs. Sheila was saying to the boss, but the bits that I heard were a good deal to the point.

"No, I mean it, Graham . . . it is as I told you

at first . . . there is no standing room for either of us on that ground . . . and you must not come here again when you know that I am alone. . . . No, Jimmie *isn't* enough!"

I wrenched the half-working ear-sense aside and jammed it into my eyes, concentrating hard on the window at which I expected every second to see a man's face. If the man was a murderer, I thought I could beat him to it. He would have to look in first before he could fire; and the boss and Mrs. Sheila were at the other end of the room, sitting before the little blaze in the grate.

The suspense didn't last very long. A hand came up first to push the window vines aside. It was a white hand, long and slender, more like a woman's than a man's. Then against the glass I saw the face, and it gave me such a turn that I thought I must be going batty.

Instead of the ugly mug of one of Clanahan's gunmen, the haggard face framed in the window sash was a face that I had seen once—and only once—before; on a certain Sunday night in the Bullard when the loose-lipped mouth belonging to it had been babbling drunken curses at the night clerk. The man at the window was the dissipated young rounder who had been pointed out as the nephew of President Dunton.

XVIII

The Name on the Register

SO long as I was holding on to the notion that the man outside was one of Clanahan's thugs, hanging around to do the boss a mischief, I thought I knew pretty well what I should do when it came to the pinch. Would I really have hauled off and shot a man, in cold blood? That's a tough question, but I guess maybe I could have screwed myself up to the sticking point, as the fellow says, with a sure-enough gunman on the other side of that window—and the boss's life at stake. But when I saw that it was young Collingwood, that was a horse of another color.

What on earth was the President's nephew doing, prowling around Major Kendrick's house after eleven o'clock at night, lugging a pistol and peeking into windows? I could see him quite plainly now, in spite of the beaded bamboo thing in the intervening doorway. He had both hands on the sill and was trying to pull himself up so that he could see into the end of the room where the fireplace was.

Just for the moment, there wasn't any danger of a blow-up. Unless he should break the glass in the

window, he couldn't get a line on either the boss or Mrs. Sheila—if that was what he was aiming to do. All the same, I kept him covered with the automatic, steadying it against the door-jamb. There had been enough said in that room to set anybody's nerves on edge; or, if it hadn't been said, it had been meant.

While the strain was at its worst, with the man outside flattening his cheek against the window-pane to get the sidewise slant, I heard the boss get out of his chair and say: "I'm keeping you out of bed, as usual; look at that clock! I'll go and wake Jimmie, and we'll vanish."

Just as he spoke, two things happened: a taxi chugged up to the gate and stopped, and the man's face disappeared from the window. I heard a quick padding of feet as of somebody running, and the next minute came the rattle of a latch-key and voices in the hall to tell me that the major and his folks were getting home. I had barely time to pocket the pistol and to drop into a chair where I could pretend to be asleep, when I felt the boss's hand on my shoulder.

"Come, Jimmie," he said. "It's time we were moving along," and in a minute or two, after he had said good-night to the major and Mrs. Kendrick, we got out.

At the gate we found the taxi driver doing some-

thing to his motor. With the scare from which I was still shaking to make my legs wobble, I grabbed at the chance which our good angel was apparently holding for us.

"Let's ride," I suggested; and when we got into the cab, I saw a man stroll up from the shadow of the sidewalk cottonwoods and say something to the driver; something that got him an invitation to ride to town on the front seat with the cabby when the car was finally cranked and started. I had a sight of our extra fare's face when he climbed up and put his back to us, and I knew it was Tarbell. But Mr. Norcross didn't.

When we reached the Bullard the boss went right up to his rooms, but I had a little investigation to make, and I stayed in the lobby to put it over. On the open page of the hotel register, in the group of names written just after the arrival of our train from the West at 7:30, I found the signature that I was looking for, "Howard Collingwood, N. Y." Putting this and that together, I concluded that our young rounder had come in from the West—which was a bit puzzling, since it left the inference that he wasn't direct from New York.

Waiting for a good chance at the night clerk, I ventured a few questions. They were answered promptly enough. Young Mr. Collingwood *had* come in on the 7:30. But he had been in Portal

City a week earlier, too, stopping over for a single day. Yes, he was alone, now, but he hadn't been on the other occasion. There was a man with him on the earlier stop-over, and he, also, registered from New York. The clerk didn't remember the other man's name, but he obligingly looked it up for me in the older register. It was Bullock, Henry Bullock; and from the badness of the handwriting the clerk said, jokingly, that he'd bet Mr. Bullock was a lawyer.

I suppose it was up to me to go to bed. It was late enough, in all conscience, and nobody knew better than I did the early-rising, early-office-opening habits of Mr. Graham Norcross, G.M. Just the same, after I had marked that Mr. Collingwood's room-key was still in its box, I went over to a corner of the lobby and sat down, determined to keep my eyes open, if such a thing were humanly possible, until our rounder should show up.

That determination let me in for a stubborn fight against the sleep habit which ran along to nearly one o'clock. But finally my patience, or whatever you care to call it, was rewarded. Just after the baggage porter had finished sing-songing his call for the night express westbound, my man came in on the run. He was still wearing the cap with two visors, and the long traveling coat was flapping about his legs.

When he rushed over to the counter and began to talk fast to the night clerk, I wasn't very far behind him. He was telling the clerk to get his grips down from the room, adjectively quick, and to hold the hotel auto so that he could catch the midnight westbound. While the boy was gone for the grips, my man made a straight shoot for the bar, and when I next got a sight of him—from behind one of the big onyx-plated pillars of the bar-room colonnade—he was pouring neat liquor down his throat as if it were water and he on fire inside.

That was about all there was to it. By the time Collingwood got back to the clerk's counter, the boy was down with the bags. The regular train auto had gone to the station with some other guests, but the clerk had found a stray taxi, and it was waiting. Collingwood looked up sort of nervously at the big clock, and paid his bill. And while the clerk was getting his change, he grabbed the pen out of the counter inkstand, and made out as if he was shading in a picture, or something, on the open register.

A half-minute later he was gone, striding out after the grip-carrying lobby boy as straight as if he had been walking a tight-rope, and never showing his recent bar visit by so much as the shudder of an eyelash. When the taxi purred away I turned to the open register to see what our maniac had been draw-

ing in it. What he had done was completely to obliterate his signature. He had scratched it over until the past master of all the hand-writing experts that ever lived couldn't have told what the name was.

XIX

The Hoodoo

IT was while we were eating breakfast the next morning in the Bullard café—the boss and I—that we got our first news of the Petrolite wreck. The story was red-headlined in the *Morning Herald*—the Hatch-owned paper—and besides being played up good and strong in the news columns, there was an editorial to back the front-page scream.

At two o'clock in the morning a fast westbound freight had left the track in Petrolite Canyon, and before they could get the flagman out, a delayed eastbound passenger had collided with the ruins. There were no lives lost, but a number of people, including the engineman, the postal clerks and the baggageman on the passenger, were injured.

The editorial, commenting on the wire stuff, was sharply critical of the Short Line management. It hinted broadly that there had been no such thing as discipline on the road since Mr. Shaffer had left it; that the rank and file was running things pretty much as it pleased; and with this there was a dig at gen-

eral managers who let old and time-tried department heads go to make room for their rich and incompetent college friends—which was meant to be a slap at Mr. Van Britt, our own and only millionaire.

Unhappily, this fault-finding had a good bit to build on, in one way. As I have said, we were having operating troubles to beat the band. With the rank and file apparently doing its level best to help out in the new "public-be-pleased" program, it seemed as if we couldn't worry through a single week without smashing something.

Latterly, even the newspapers that were friendly to the Norcross management were beginning to comment on the epidemic of disasters, and nothing in the world but the boss's policy of taking all the editors into his confidence when they wanted to investigate kept the rising storm of criticism somewhere within bounds.

Mr. Norcross had read the paper before he handed it over to me, and afterward he hurried his breakfast a little. When he reached the office, Mr. Van Britt was waiting for the chief.

"We've got it in the neck once more," he gritted, flashing up his own copy of the *Herald*. "Did you read that editorial?"

The boss nodded and said: "It's inspired, of course; everything you see in that sheet takes its color from the Red Tower offices."

"I know; but it bites, just the same," was the brittle rejoinder.

"Never mind the newspaper talk," the boss interjected. "How bad is the trouble this time?"

"Pretty bad. I've just had Brockman on the wire from Alicante. The freight is practically a total loss; a good half of it is in the river. Kirgan says he can pick the freight engine up and rebuild it; but the passenger machine is a wreck."

"How did it happen?"

"It's like a good many of the others. Nobody seems to know. Brockman put the freight engine crew on the rack, and they say there was a small boulder on the track—that it rolled down the canyon slope just ahead of them as they were turning a curve. They struck it, and both men say that the engine knocked it off into the river apparently without hurting anything. But two seconds later the entire train left the track and piled up all over the right-of-way."

"The engineer and fireman weren't hurt?"

"No; they both jumped on the high side. But, of course, they were pretty badly shaken up. Riggs, the fireman, got out of the raffle first and tried to flag the passenger train, but he was too late."

The boss was sitting back in his chair and making little rings on the desk blotter with the point of his letter-opener.

"Upton, these knock-outs have got to be stopped."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the little millionaire; "you don't have to tell me that! If we can't stop 'em, Uncle Dunton will have plenty of good reasons for cleaning us all out, lock, stock, and barrel! I was talking with Carter, in the claim office, this morning. Our loss and damage account for the past month is something frightful!"

"It is," said the boss gravely. And then: "Upton, we're not altogether as bright as we might be. Has it never occurred to you that we are having too much bad luck to warrant us in charging it all up to the chapter of accidents?"

Mr. Van Britt blew his cheeks out until the stubby, cropped mustache bristled like porcupine quills.

"So you've been getting your pointer, too, have you?" he threw in.

Mr. Norcross didn't answer the question directly.

"Put Tarbell on the job, and if he needs help, let him pick his own men," he directed. "We want to know why that boulder tumbled down ahead of Number Seventeen, and I want to see Tarbell's report on it. Keep at it night and day, Upton. The infection is getting into the rank and file and it's spreading like a sickness. You've railroaded long enough to know what that means. If it becomes psychological, we shall have all the trouble we need."

"I know," nodded the superintendent. "I went through a siege of that kind on the Great Southwestern, one winter. It was horrible. Men who had been running trains year in and year out, and never knowing that they had any nerves, went to pieces if you'd snap your fingers at them."

"That's it," said the boss. "We don't want to fall into that ditch. Things are quite bad enough, as they are."

This ended it for the time. The Petrolite Canyon wreck was picked up, the track was cleared, and once more our trains were moving on time. But anybody could see that the entire Short Line had a case of "nerves." Kirgan, Kirgan the cold-blooded, showed it one afternoon when I went over to his office to return a bunch of blue-prints sent in for the boss's approval. The big master-mechanic had a round-house foreman "on the carpet" and was harrying him like the dickens for letting an engine go out with one of her truck safety chains hanging loose.

Ever since we had gone together on the rescue run to Timber Mountain, Mart and I had been sort of chummy, and after the foreman had gone away with his foot in his hand, I joshed Kirgan a little about the way he had hammered the round-house man.

"Maybe I did, Jimmie," he said, half as if he were already sorry for the cussing out. "But the shape

we're getting into is enough to make an angel bawl. Why, Great Moses! a crew can't take an engine out here in the yard to do a common job o' switchin' without breakin' something 'r hurtin' somebody!"

"Bad medicine," I told him. "It's worrying the bosses, too. What's doing it, Mart?"

"Maybe you can tell," he growled. "It's a hoodoo—that's what *it* is. Seven engines in the shops in the last nine days, and three more that haven't been fished out-a the ditch yet. I wish Mr. Van Britt 'd fire the whole jumpy outfit!"

It didn't seem as though firing was needed so much as a dose of nerve tonic of some sort. Tarbell was working hard on the problem, quietly, and without making any talk about it, and Kirgan was giving him all the men he asked for from the shops; quick-witted fellows who were up in all the mechanical details, and who made better spotters than outsiders would because they knew the road and the ropes. But it was no use. I saw some of Tarbell's reports, and they didn't show any crookedness. It seemed to be just bad luck—one landslide after another of it.

Meanwhile, New York had waked up again. President Dunton had been off the job somewhere, I guess, but now he was back, and the things he wired to the boss were enough to make your hair stand on end. I looked every day to see Mr. Nor-

cross pitch the whole shooting-match into the fire and quit, cold.

He'd never taken anything like Mr. Dunton's abuse from anybody before, and he couldn't seem to get hardened to it. But he was loyal to Mr. Chadwick; and, of course, he knew that Mr. Dunton's hot wires were meant to nag him into resigning. Then there was Mrs. Sheila. I sort of suspected she was holding him up to the rack, every day and every minute of the day. No doubt she was.

It was one evening after he had been out to the major's for just a little while, and had come back to the office, that he sent for Mr. Van Britt, who was also working late. There was blood on the moon, and I saw it in the way the boss's jaw was working.

"Upton," he began, as short as pie-crust, "have you thought of any way to break this wreck hoodoo yet?"

Mr. Van Britt sat down and crossed his solid little legs.

"If I had, I shouldn't be losing sleep at the rate of five or six hours a night," he rasped.

"There's one thing that we haven't tried," the boss shot back. "We've been advertising it as bad luck, keeping our own suspicious to ourselves and letting the men believe what they pleased. We'll

change all that. I want you to call your trainmen in as fast as you can get at them. Tell them—from me, if you want to—that there isn't any bad luck about it; that the enemies of this management are making an organized raid on the property itself for the purpose of putting us out of the fight. Tell them the whole story, if you want to: how we're trying our best to make a spoon out of a spoiled horn, and how there is an army of grafters and wreckers in this State which is doing its worst to knock us out of the box."

Mr. Van Britt uncrossed his legs and sat staring for a second or two. Then he whistled and said: "By Jove! Have you caught 'em with the goods, at last?"

"No," was the curt reply. "Call it a ruse, if you like: it's justifiable, and it will work. If you give the force something tangible to lay hold of, it will work the needed miracle. It is only the mysterious that terrifies. Railroad employees, as a whole, are perfectly intelligent human beings, open to conviction. The management which doesn't profit by that fact is lame. If you do this and appeal to the loyalty of the men, you will make a private detective out of every man in the train service, and every one of them keen to be the first to catch the wreckers. You can add a bit of a reward for that, if you like, and I'll pay it out of my own bank account."

For a full minute our captive millionaire didn't say a word. Then he grinned like a good-natured little Chinese god.

"Who gave you this idea of taking the pay-roll into your confidence, Graham?" he asked softly.

For the first time in all the weeks and months I'd been knowing him, the boss dodged; dodged just like any of us might.

"I've been talking to Major Kendrick," he said. "He is a wise old man, Upton, and he hears a good many things that don't get printed in the newspapers."

I could see that this excuse didn't fool Mr. Van Britt for a single instant, and there was a look in his eye that I couldn't quite understand. Neither could I make much out of what he said.

"We'll go into that a little deeper some day, Graham—after this epileptic attack has been fought off. This idea—which you confess isn't your own—is a pretty shrewd one, and I shouldn't wonder if it would work, if we can get it in motion before the hoodoo breaks us wide open. And, as you say, the accusation is justifiable, even if we can't prove up against the Hatch outfit. That turned-over rail in Petrolite Canyon, for example, might have been helped along by——"

It was Kelso, Mr. Van Britt's stenographer, who smashed in with the interruption. He was in his

shirt-sleeves, as if he'd just got up from his typewriter, and he rushed in with his mouth open and his eyes like saucers.

"They—they want you in the despatcher's office!" he panted, jerking the words out at Mr. Van Britt. "Durgin has let Number Five get by for a head-ender with the 'Flyer,' and he's gone crazy!"

XX

The Helpless Wires

WHEN Bobby Kelso shot his news at us we all made a quick break for the despatcher's office, the boss in the lead. It was a big bare room flanking Mr. Van Britt's quarters at the western end of the second floor corridor and the windows looked out upon the yard twinkling with its red and yellow and green switch lights.

Durgin, the night despatcher, had been alone on the train desk, and the only other operators on duty were the car-record man and the young fellow who acted as a relief on the commercial wire. When we got there, we found that Tarbell had happened to be in the office when Durgin blew up. He was sitting in at the train key, trying to get the one intermediate wire station between the two trains that had failed to get their "meet" orders, and this was the first I knew that he really was the expert telegraph operator that his pay-roll description said he was.

Durgin looked like a tortured ghost. He was a

thin, dark man with a sort of scattering beard and limp black hair; one of the clearest-headed despatchers in the bunch, and the very last man, you'd say, to get rattled in a tangle-up. Yet here he was, hunched in a chair at the car-record table in the corner, a staring-eyed, pallid-faced wreck, with the sweat standing in big drops on his forehead and his hands shaking as if he had the palsy.

Morris, the relief man, gave us the particulars, such as they were, speaking in a hushed voice as if he was afraid of breaking in on Tarbell's steady rattling of the key in the Crow Gulch station call.

"Number Four" — Four was the eastbound "Flyer"—"is five hours off her time," he explained. "As near as I can get it, Durgin was going to make her 'meet' with Number Five at the blind siding at Sand Creek tank. She ought to have had her orders somewhere west of Bauxite Junction, and Five ought to have got hers at Banta. Durgin says he simply forgot that the 'Flyer' was running late: that she was still out and had a 'meet' to make somewhere with Five."

Brief as Morris's explanation was, it was clear enough for anybody who knew the road and the schedules. The regular meeting-point for the two passenger trains was at a point well east of Portal City, instead of west, and so, of course, would not concern the Desert Division crew of either train,

since all crews were changed at Portal City. From Banta to Bauxite Junction, some thirty-odd miles, there was only one telegraph station, namely, that at the Crow Gulch lumber camp, seven miles beyond the Timber Mountain "Y" and the gravel pit where the stolen 1016 had been abandoned.

Unluckily, Crow Gulch was only a day station, the day wires being handled by a young man who was half in the pay of the railroad and half in that of the saw-mill company. This young man slept at the mill camp, which was a mile back in the gulch. There was only one chance in a thousand that he would be down at the railroad station at ten o'clock at night, and it was on that thousandth chance that Tarbell was rattling the Crow Gulch call. If Five were making her card time, she was now about half-way between Timber Mountain "Y" and Crow Gulch. And Four, the "Flyer," had just left Bauxite —with no orders whatever. Which meant that the two trains would come together somewhere near Sand Creek, one of them, at least, running like the mischief to make up what time she could.

Mr. Van Britt was as good a wire man as anybody on the line, but it was the boss who took things in hand.

"There is a long-distance telephone to the Crow Gulch saw-mill; have you tried that?" he barked at Tarbell.

The big young fellow who looked like a cow-boy —and had really been one, they said—glanced up and nodded: "The call's in," he responded. " 'Central' says she can't raise anybody."

"What was Four's report from Bauxite?"

"Four hours and fifty-two minutes off time."

"That will bring them together somewhere in the hill curves this side of Sand Creek," the boss said to Mr. Van Britt; "just where there is the least chance of their seeing each other before they hit." Then to Tarbell: "Try Bauxite and find out if there is a pusher engine there that can be sent out to chase the 'Flyer'."

Tarbell nodded without breaking his monotonous repetition of the Crow Gulch call.

"I did that first," he put in. "There's an engine there, and they're getting her out. But it's a slim chance; the 'Flyer' has too good a start."

For the next three or four minutes the tension was something fierce. The boss and Mr. Van Britt hung over the train desk, and Tarbell kept up his insistent clatter at the key. I had an eye on Durgin. He was still hunched up in the record-man's chair, and to all appearances had gone stone-blind crazy. Yet I couldn't get rid of the idea that he was listening—listening as if all of his sealed-up senses had turned in to intensify the one of hearing.

Just about the time when the suspense had grown

so keen that it seemed as if it couldn't be borne a second longer, Morris, who was sitting in at the office phone, called out sharply: "Long-distance says she has Crow Gulch lumber camp!"

Mr. Van Britt jumped to take the phone, and we got one side of the talk—our side—in shot-like sentences:

"That you, Bertram? All right; this is Van Britt, at Portal City. Take one of the mules and ride for your life down the gulch to the station! Get that? Stop Number Five and make her take siding quick. Report over your own wire what you do. *Hurry!*"

By the time Mr. Van Britt got back to the train desk, the boss had his pencil out and was figuring on Bertram's time margin. It was now ten-twelve, and Five's time at Crow Gulch was ten-eighteen. The Crow Gulch operator had just six minutes in which to get his mule and cover the rough mile down the gulch.

"He'll never make it," said Tarbell, who knew the gulch road. "Our only chance on that lay is that Five may happen to be a few minutes late—and she was right on the dot at Banta."

There was nothing to do but wait, and the waiting was savage. Tarbell had a nerve of iron, but I could see his hand shake as it lay on the glass-topped table. The boss was cool enough outwardly,

but I knew that in his brain there was a heart-breaking picture of those two fast passenger trains rushing together in the night among the hills with no hint of warning to help them save themselves. Mr. Van Britt couldn't keep still. He had his hands jammed in the side pockets of his coat and was pacing back and forth in the little space between the train desk and the counter railing.

At the different tables in the room the sounders were clicking away as if nothing were happening or due to happen, and above the spattering din and clatter you could hear the escapement of the big standard-time clock on the wall, hammering out the seconds that might mean life or death to two or three hundred innocent people.

In that horrible suspense the six minutes pulled themselves out to an eternity for that little bunch of us in the despatcher's office who could do nothing but wait. On the stroke of ten-eighteen, the time when Five was due at Crow Gulch on her schedule, Tarbell tuned his relay to catch the first faint tappings from the distant day-station. Another sounder was silent. There was hope in the delay, and Morris voiced it.

"He's there, and he's too busy to talk to us," he suggested, in a hushed voice; and Disbrow, the car-record man, added: "That's it; it'd take a minute or two to get them in on the siding."

The second minute passed, and then a third, and yet there was no word from Bertram. "Call him," snapped the boss to Tarbell, but before the ex-cowboy's hand could reach the key, the sounder began to rattle out a string of dots and dashes; ragged Morse it was, but we could all read it only too plainly.

"Too late—mule threw me and I had to crawl and drag a game leg—Five passed full speed at tennineteen—I couldn't make it."

I saw the boss's hands shut up as though the finger nails would cut into the palms.

"That ends it," he said, with a sort of swearing groan in his voice; and then to Tarbell: "You may as well call Kirgan and tell him to order out the wrecking train. Then have Perkins make up a relief train while you're calling the doctors. Van Britt, you go and notify the hospital over your own office wire. Have my private car put into the relief, and see to it that it has all the necessary supplies. And you'd better notify the undertakers, too."

Great Joash! but it was horrible—for us to be hustling around and making arrangements for the funeral while the people who were to be gathered up and buried were still swinging along live and well, half of them in the crookings among the Timber Mountain foot-hills and the other half somewhere in the desert stretches below Sand Creek!

Tarbell had sent Disbrow to the phone to call

Kirgan, and Mr. Van Britt was turning away to go to his own office, when the chair in the corner by the car-record table fell over backwards with a crash and Durgin came staggering across the room. He was staring straight ahead of him as if he had gone blind, and the sweat was running down his face to lose itself in the straggling beard.

When he spoke his voice seemed to come from away off somewhere, and he was still staring at the blank wall beyond the counter-railing.

"Did I—did I hear somebody say you're sending for the undertakers?" he choked, with a dry rattle in his throat; and then, without waiting for an answer: "While you're at it, you'd better get one for me . . . there's the money to pay him," and he tossed a thick roll of bank bills, wrapped around with a rubber band, over to Tarbell at the train desk.

Naturally, the little grand-stand play with the bank roll made a diversion, and that is why the muffled crash of a pistol shot came with a startling shock to everybody. When we turned to look, the mischief was done. Durgin had crumpled down into a misshapen heap on the floor and the sight we saw was enough to make your blood run cold.

You see, he had put the muzzle of the pistol into his mouth, and—but it's no use: I can't tell about it, and the very thought of that thing that had just a minute before been a man, lying there on the floor

makes me see black and want to keel over. What he had said about sending for an extra undertaker was right as right. With the top of his head blown off, the poor devil didn't need anything more in this world except the burying.

XXI

Billy Morris Explains

SOMEBODY has said, mighty truthfully, that even a death in the family doesn't stop the common routine; that the things that have to be done will go grinding on, just the same, whether all of us live, or some of us die. Disbrow had jumped from the telephone at the crash of Durgin's shot, and for just a second or so we all stood around the dead despatcher, nobody making a move.

Then Mr. Norcross came alive with a jerk, telling Disbrow to get back on his job of calling out the wreck wagons and the relief train, and directing Bobby Kelso to go to another 'phone and call an undertaker to come and get Durgin's body. Tarbell turned back to the train desk to keep things from getting into a worse tangle than they already were in, and to wait for the dreadful news, and the boss stood by him.

This second wait promised to be the worst of all. The collision was due to happen miles from the nearest wire station; the news, when we should get it, would probably be carried back to Bauxite Junction by the pusher engine which had gone out to try to

overtake the "Flyer." But even in that case it might be an agonizing hour or more before we could hear anything.

In a little while Disbrow had clicked in his call to Kirgan, and when the undertaker's wagon came to gather up what was left of the dead despatcher, the car-record man was hurriedly writing off his list of doctors, and Mr. Van Britt had gone down to superintend the making up of the relief train. True to his theory, which, among other things, laid down the broad principle that the public had a right to be given all the facts in a railroad disaster, Mr. Norcross was just telling me to call up the *Mountaineer* office, when Tarbell, calmly inking time reports upon the train sheet, flung down his pen and snatched at his key to "break" the chattering sounder.

Mr. Van Britt had come up-stairs again, and he and the boss were both standing over Tarbell when the "G-S" break cleared the wire. Instantly there came a quick call, "G-S" "G-S," followed by the signature, "B-J" for Bauxite Junction. Tarbell answered, and then we all heard what Bauxite had to say:

"Pusher overtook Number Four three miles west of Sand Creek and has brought her back here. What orders for her?"

Somebody groaned, "Oh, thank God!" and Mr. Van Britt dropped into a chair as if he had been hit

by a cannon ball. Only the boss kept his head, calling out sharply to Disbrow to break off on the doctors' list and to hurry and stop Kirgan from getting away with the wrecking train. Then, as curtly as if it were all merely a matter of routine, he told Tarbell what to do; how he was to give the "Flyer" orders to wait at Bauxite for Number Five, and then to proceed under time-card regulations to Portal City.

When it was all over, and Tarbell had been given charge of the despatching while a hurry call was sent out for the night relief man, Donohue, to come down and take the train desk, there was a little committee meeting in the general manager's office, with the boss in the chair, and Mr. Van Britt sitting in for the other member.

"Of course, you've drawn your own conclusions, Upton," the boss began, when he had asked me to shut the door.

"I guess so," was the grave rejoinder. "I'm afraid it is only too plain that Durgin was hired to do it. What became of the money?"

"I have it here," said the boss, and he took the blood-money bank-roll from his pocket and removed the rubber band. "Count it, Jimmie," he ordered, passing it to me.

I ran through the bunch. It was in twenties and fifties, and there was an even thousand dollars.

"That is the price of a man's life," said Mr. Van Britt, soberly, and then Mr. Norcross said, "Who knows anything about Durgin? Was he a married man?"

Mr. Van Britt shook his head.

"He had been married, but he and his wife didn't live together. He had no relatives here. I knew him in the southwest two years ago. He'd had domestic trouble of some kind, and didn't mix or mingle much with the other men. But he was a good despatcher, and two months ago, when we had an opening here, I sent for him."

"You think there is no doubt but that he was bribed to put those trains together to-night?"

"None in the least—only I wish we had a little better proof of it."

"Where did he live?"

"He boarded at Mrs. Chandler's, out on Cross Street. Morris boards there, too, I believe."

The boss turned to me.

"Jimmie, go and get Morris."

I carried the call and brought Morris back with me. He was a cheerful, red-headed fellow, and everybody liked him.

"It isn't a 'sweat-box' session, Morris," said the boss, quietly, when we came in and the relief operator sat down, sort of half scared, on the edge of a

chair. "We want to know something more about Durgin. He roomed at your place, didn't he?"

Morris admitted it, but said he'd never been very chummy with the despatcher; that Durgin wasn't chummy with anybody. Then the boss went straight to the point, as he usually did.

"You were present and saw all that happened in the other room. Can you tell us anything about that money?" pointing to the pile of bills on my desk.

Billy Morris wriggled himself into a little better chair-hold. "Nothing that would be worth telling, if things hadn't turned out just as they have," he returned. "But now I guess I know. I left Mrs. Chandler's this evening about seven o'clock to come on duty, and Durgin was just ahead of me. Some fellow—a man in a snuff-colored overcoat and with a soft hat pulled down so that I couldn't see his face—stopped Durgin on the sidewalk, and they talked together."

"Go on," said Mr. Van Britt.

"I didn't hear what was said; I was up on the stoop, trying to make Mrs. Chandler's broken door latch work to hold the door shut. But I saw the overcoated man pass something to Durgin, and saw Durgin put whatever it was into his pocket. Then the other man dodged and went away, and did it so quick that I didn't see which way he went or what

became of him. I walked on down the steps after I had got the door to stay shut and tried to overtake Durgin—just to walk on down here with him. But I guess he must have run after he left the corner, for I didn't see anything more of him until I got to the office."

"He was there when you came in?" It was Mr. Norcross who wanted to know.

"Yes. He had his coat off and was at work on the train sheet."

"That was a little after seven," said Mr. Van Britt. "What happened between that and ten o'clock?"

"Nothing. Disbrow was busy at his table, and I had some work to do, though not very much. I don't think Durgin left his chair, or said anything to anybody until he jumped up and began to walk the floor, taking on and saying that he'd put Four and Five together on the single track. Just then, Tarbell came in and jumped for the train key, and I ran out to give the alarm."

There was silence for a little time, and then the boss said, "That's all, Morris; all but one thing. Do you think you would recognize the man in the snuff-colored overcoat, if you should see him again?"

"Yes, I might; if he had on the same coat and hat."

"That will do, then. Keep this thing to yourself,

and if the newspaper people come after you, send them to Mr. Van Britt or to me."

After Morris had gone, Mr. Van Britt shook his head sort of savagely.

"It's hell, Graham!" he ripped out, bouncing to his feet and beginning to tramp up and down the room. "To think that these devils would take the chance of murdering a lot of totally innocent people to gain their end! What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know yet, Upton; but I am going to do something. This state of affairs can't go on. The simplest thing is for me to throw up the job and let the Short Line drop back into the old rut. I'm not sure that it wouldn't save a good many lives in the end if I should do it. And yet it seems such a cowardly thing to do—to resign under fire."

Mr. Van Britt had his hand on the door-knob, and what he said made me warm to my finger-tips.

"We're all standing by you, Graham; all, you understand—to the last man and the last ditch. And you're not going to pitch it up; you're going to stay until you have thrown the harpoon into these high-binders, clear up to the hitchings. That's my prophecy. The trouble's over for to-night, and you'd better go up to the hotel and turn in. There is another day coming, or if there isn't, it won't make any difference to any of us. Good-night."

XXII

What the Pilot Engine Found

FOR a time after the suicide of the off-trick-despatcher the wreck epidemic paused. Acting upon Mr. Norcross's suggestion, Mr. Van Britt called his trainmen in, a crew at a time, and gave them the straight tip; and after that the hoodoo died a natural death, and a good many pairs of eyes all along the Short Line were keeping a sharp lookout for the trouble-makers.

In the meantime, Tarbell, still digging faithfully, managed to turn up a few facts that were worth something. In the Petrolite case he found a lone prospector living in a shack high up on the farther side of the canyon who told him that late in the evening of the day preceding the wreck he had seen two men climbing the slope from which the boulder had been dislodged, and that one of them was carrying a pick. Also, further investigation seemed to prove that the rail which the blow of the rock was supposed to have knocked loose had been previously weakened, either by drawing some of the spikes, or by unscrewing the nuts on the bolts at the joints.

In another field, and this time under Ripley's in-

structions, our ex-cow-punch' had been able to set and bait a trap. By diligent search he had found the man Murphy, the Clanahan henchman, who, under pressure, had given away the Timber Mountain plot which had climaxed in the kidnapping of the boss. This man had been deliberately shot in a bar-room brawl and left for dead. But he had crawled away and had got out of town to live and recover at a distant cattle ranch in the Limberton Hills.

When Tarbell discovered him he had cut out the booze, had grown a beard, and was thirsting for vengeance. Tarbell brought him back to Portal City, and presently there began to be developments. Murphy knew all the ropes. In a little time, Ripley, with Tarbell's help, was loaded for bear. One chilly October afternoon the lawyer came down to our office to tell Mr. Norcross that the game was cornered.

"All you have to do now is to give the word," was the way Ripley wound up. "You refused to do it on a former occasion because we couldn't get the men higher up. This time we can nail Clanahan, and a good few of the political gangsters and bosses in the other towns along the line. What do you say?"

The boss looked up with the little horse-shoe frown wrinkling between his eyes.

"Can we get Hatch and Henckel?"

"No; not yet."

"Very well; then you may lock those papers up in your safe and we'll wait. When you can see your way clear to a criminal trial, with Rufus Hatch and Gustave Henckel in the prisoner's dock, we'll start the legal machinery: but not before."

By now we were right on the eve of the State election. As far as anybody could see, the railroad had stayed free and clear of the political fight. The boss had kept his promise to maintain neutrality and was still keeping it.

At the appointed time the big day dawned, and the political wind-up held the center of the stage. So far as we were concerned, it passed off very quietly. From the wire gossip that dribbled in during the day it appeared that the railroad vote was heavy, though there were neither charges nor counter-charges to indicate which way it had been thrown.

Along in the afternoon the newspaper offices began to put out bulletins, and by evening the result was no longer doubtful. For the first time in years the power of the political machine had been smashed decisively at the polls, and on the following morning the *Mountaineer* announced the election of Governor Burrell, with a safe working majority in both houses of the Legislature for the Independents.

Naturally, there was all sorts of a yell from the

other side of the fence. Charges were freely made, now, that the railroad had deliberately ditched its friends, and all that. Also there were the bluest kind of predictions for the future, most of them winding up with the assertion that there could be no such thing as true prosperity for the country while the Short Line continued under its present management.

It was on the third day after the election, rather late in the afternoon, that the boss had a call from a mining promoter named Dawes, representing a bunch of mine owners at Strathcona who were having trouble with the smelter.

I was busy at the time and didn't pay much attention to what was said, but I got the drift of it. The smelter, one of the few Hatch monopolies which hadn't been shaken loose as yet, was located in the gulch six miles below Strathcona, and it was served exclusively by its own industrial railroad, which it was using as a lever to pry an excessive hauling charge out of the mine owners. Wouldn't Mr. Norcross try to do something about it?

The boss said he'd do anything he could, and asked what the mine owners wanted. Dawes said they wanted help; that they were going to hold a mass meeting in Strathcona the following morning at nine o'clock. Would it, or wouldn't it, be possible for Mr. Norcross to be present at that meeting?

Of course, the boss said he'd go. It meant the better part of a night's run, special, in the private car, but that didn't make any difference. Dawes went away, and before we broke off to go to dinner at the railroad club, I was given a memorandum order for the special.

At the club I found that Mr. Norcross had an invited guest—Major Kendrick. For a week or two Mrs. Sheila had been visiting at the State capital, and the major's wife and Maisie Ann were with her. So the good old major was sort of unattached, and glad enough, I took it, to be a guest at anybody's table.

For a while the table talk—in which, of course, Jimmie Dodds hadn't any part whatever—circled around the late landslide election, and what Governor Burrell's party would do, now that it had the say-so. But by and by it got around to the railroad situation.

"You're putting up a mighty good fight, Graham, my son, but it isn't over yet—not by a jugful, suh"—this isn't just the way the major said it, but it's as near as I can come to his soft Southern drawl with the smothered "r's." "I've known Misteh Rufus Hatch for a good many yeahs, and he has the perseve'ance of the ve'y devil. With all that has been done, you must neveh forget, for a single hou'uh, that youh admirable reform structchuh stands, as

yet, upon the life of a single man. Don't lose sight of that, Graham."

The boss looked up kind of curiously.

"You and Sheila seem to think that that point needs emphasizing more than any other," he commented.

The major's fine old eyes twinkled gravely.

"You are mighty safe in payin' strict attention to whatever the little gyerl tells you, Graham, my boy," he asserted. "She has a way of gettin' at the heart of things that puts us meah men to shame—she has, for a fact, suh."

"She has been very helpful to me," the boss put in, with his eyes in his plate. "In fact, I may say that she has herself suggested a good many of the moves in the railroad game. It's marvelous, and I can't understand how she can do it."

They went on for a while, singing Mrs. Sheila's praises over in a good many different ways, and I thought, wherever she might happen to be just then, her pretty little ears ought to be burning good and hard. To hear them talk you would have thought she was another Portia-person, and then some.

The dinner wore itself out after a while, and when the waiter brought the cigars, the boss was looking at his watch.

"I'm sorry I can't stay and smoke with you, major," he said, pushing his chair back. "But the

business grind never lets up. I'm obliged to go to Strathcona to-night."

I don't know what the major was going to say to this abrupt break-away: the after-dinner social cigar was a sort of religious ceremony with him. But whatever he was going to say, he didn't say it, for at that moment a telegraph boy came in and handed him a message. He put on his other glasses and read the telegram, with his big goatee looking more than ever like a dagger and the fierce white mustaches twitching. At the end of things he folded the message and put it into his pocket, saying, sort of soberly:

"Graham, there are times when Sheila's intuhferences are mighty neah uncanny; they are, for a fact, suh. This wire is from her. What do you suppose it says?"

Of course, the boss said he couldn't suppose anything about it, and the major went on.

"She tells me, in just seven words, not to let you go to Strathcona to-night. Now what do you make of that? How on top of God's green earth did she know, away off yondeh at the capital, that you were meaning to go to Strathcona to-night?"

Mr. Norcross shook his head. Then he said: "There are wires—both kinds—though I don't know why anybody should telegraph or telephone the capital that I expect to attend a mine-owners'

meeting to-morrow morning in the big gold camp. That's why I'm going, you know."

"But this warning," the major insisted. "There's a reason for it, Graham, as sure as you are bawn!"

Again the boss shook his head.

"Between you two, you and Sheila, I'm due to acquire a case of nerves. I don't know what she has heard, but I can't afford to dodge a business appointment. I have wired the Strathcona people that I shall be there to-morrow morning, and it is too late to make other arrangements. Sheila has merely overheard an echo of the threats that are constantly being made by the Hatch sympathizers. It's the aftermath of the election, but it's all talk. They're down and out, and they haven't the nerve to strike back, now."

That ended matters at the club, and the boss and I walked down to the headquarters. The special, with Buck Chandler on the smart little eight-wheeler that we always had for the private-car trips, was waiting, and at the last minute I thought I wasn't going to get to go.

"There's no need of your putting in a night on the road, Jimmie," said the boss, with the kindly thought for other people's comfort that never failed him. But after I had begged a little, telling him that he'd need somebody to take notes in the mine meeting, he said, "All right," and we got aboard and

gave the word to Maclise, the conductor, to get his clearance and go.

A few minutes later we pulled out and the night run was begun. Like every other car the boss had ever owned, the "05" was fitted up as a working office, and since he had me along, he opened up a lot of claim papers upon which the legal department was giving him the final say-so, and we went to work.

For the next two hours I was so busy that I didn't know when we passed the various stations. There were no passenger trains to meet, and the despatcher was apparently giving us "regardless" rights over everything else, since we made no stops. At half-past nine, Mr. Norcross snapped a rubber band over the last of the claim files, lighted a pipe, and told me I might go to bed if I wanted to; said that he was going himself after he'd had a smoke. Just then, Chandler whistled for a station, and, looking out of a window, I saw that we were pulling into Bauxite, the little wind-blown junction from which the Strathcona branch led away into the northern mountains.

Wanting a bite of fresh air before turning in, I got off when we made the stop and strolled up to the engine. Maclise was in the office, getting orders for the branch, and Chandler was squatting in the gangway of the 815 and waiting. Up ahead of us, and too far away for me to read the number on her tender, there was a light engine. I thought at first

it was the pusher which was kept at Bauxite to help heavy freights up the branch grades, and I wondered what it was doing out on the branch "Y" and in our way.

"What's the pusher out for, Buck?" I asked.

Chandler grinned down at me.

"You ain't so much of a railroad man as you might be, Jimmie," he said. "That ain't the pusher."

"What is it, then?"

"It's our first section, runnin' light to Strathcona."

Maybe Chandler was right, that I wasn't much of a railroad man, but I savvied the Short Line operating rules well enough to know that it wasn't usual to run a light engine, deadheading over the road, as a section of a special. Also, I knew that Buck knew it.

With that last little talk over the club dinner-table fresh in mind, I began to wonder, but instead of asking Chandler any more questions about the engine out ahead, I asked him if I might ride a piece with him up the branch; and when he said "Sure," I climbed up and humped myself on the fireman's box.

Maclise got his orders in due time and we pulled out. I noticed that when he gave Chandler the word, he also made motions with his lantern to the engine up ahead and it promptly steamed away,

speeding up until it had about a half-mile lead and then holding it. That seemed funny, too. Though it is a rule that is often broken on all railroads, the different sections of a train are supposed to keep at least five minutes apart, and our "first" wasn't much more than a minute away from us at any time.

Another thing that struck me as being funny was the way Chandler was running. It was only sixty mountain miles up the branch to the big gold camp, and we ought to have been able to make it by one o'clock, taking it dead easy. But the way Buck was niggling along it looked as if it might be going to take us all night.

Just the same, nothing happened. The first ten miles was across a desert stretch with only a slightly rising grade, and it was pretty much all tangent—straight line. Beyond the ten-mile station of Nippo we hit the mountain proper, climbing it through a dry canyon, with curves that blocked off everything fifty feet ahead of the engine, and grades that would have made pretty good toboggan slides. The night was fine and starlit, but there was no moon and the canyon shadows loomed like huge walls to shut us in.

On the reverse curves I could occasionally get a glimpse of the red tail lights of the engine which ought, by rights, to have been five full minutes ahead of us. It was still holding its short lead, jogging along as leisurely as we were.

What the Pilot Engine Found

With nothing to do and not much to see, I got sleepy after a while, and about the time when I was thinking that I might as well climb back over the tender and turn in, I dozed off right there on the fireman's box—which was safe enough, at the snail's pace we were running. When I awoke it was with the feeling that I hadn't been asleep more than a minute or two, but the facts were against me. It was nearly one o'clock in the morning, and we had worried through the thirty-five miles of canyon run and were climbing the steep talus of Slide Mountain.

At first I didn't know what it was that woke me. On my side of the engine the big mountain fell away, miles it seemed, on a slope on which a man could hardly have kept his footing, and where a train, jumping the track, would roll forever before it would stop in the gorges at the bottom. While I was rubbing my eyes, the eight-wheeler gave another little jerk, and I saw that Chandler was slowing for a stop; saw this and got a glimpse of somebody on the track ahead, flagging us down with a lantern.

A minute later the brakes had been set and Buck and I were off. As we swung down from the engine step, Maclise joined us, and we went to meet the man with the lantern. He was the fireman of the engine ahead, and when we got around on the track

I saw that our "first section" was stopped just a little way farther on.

"What is it, Barty?" said Maclise, when we came up to the fireman.

"It's them hell-fired wreckers again," was the gritting reply. "Rail joint disconnected and sprung out so's to let us off down the mountain."

I thought it was up to me to go back and tell the boss, but there wasn't any need of it. The stop or the slow running or something had roused him, and he was up and dressed and coming along beside the engine. When he came up, Maclise told him why we were stopping. He didn't say anything about the rail break, but he did ask, sort of sharp and quick, what engine that was up ahead.

I don't know what Maclise told him. Chandler turned to go back to his engine, and the rest of us were moving along the other way, the boss setting the pace with Maclise at his elbow. Three rail-lengths ahead of the stopped light engine we came to the break. The head engineer and another man were down on their hands and knees examining it, and when they stood up at our coming, I saw that the other man was Mr. Van Britt.

"What?" said the boss; "you here?"

Our only millionaire nodded.

"I ride the line once in a while—just to see how things are going," he returned crisply.

The boss didn't say anything more, but he knelt to look at the break. It was a trap, all right, set, beyond all question of doubt, to catch the private-car special. The fish-plates had been removed from a joint in the left-hand rail and the end of the down-hill rail had been sprung out to make a derailing switch, which was held in position by the insertion of one of the fish-plates between the rail-webs. If we had hit the trap, going at even ordinary mountain-climbing speed, there would have been nothing left to tell the tale but a heap of scrap at the bottom of the thousand-foot dump.

There wasn't very much talk made by anybody. Under Mr. Van Britt's directions the engineer and fireman of the pilot engine brought tools and the break was repaired. All they had to do was to spring the bent rail back into place and spike it, and bolt the fish-plates on again.

While they were doing it the boss stood aside with Mr. Van Britt, and I heard what was said. Mr. Van Britt began it by saying, "We don't need any detectives this time. You are on your way to Strathcona to put a crimp in the smelter squeeze—the last of the Red Tower monopolies—so Dawes told me. He was probably foolish enough to tell others, and the word was passed to scrag you before you could get to it. This trap was set to catch your special."

"Evidently," barked the boss; and then: "How did you happen to be here on that engine, Upton?"

"I've been ahead of you all the way up from Portal City," was the calm reply. "I thought it might be safer if you had a pilot to show you the way. I guess I must have had a hunch."

The boss turned on him like a flash.

"You had something more than a hunch: what was it—a wire?"

Mr. Van Britt gritted his teeth a little, but he told the truth.

"Yes; a friend of ours tipped me off—not about the broken track, of course, but just in a general way. I knew you'd bully me if I should tell you that I was going to run a pilot ahead of you, so I didn't tell you."

The break was repaired and the men were taking the tools back to the engine. As we turned to follow them, Mr. Norcross said: "Just one more question, Upton. Did your wire come from the capital?"

But at this Mr. Van Britt seemed to forget that he was talking to his general manager.

"It's none of your damned business where it came from," he snapped back; and that ended it.

XXIII

The Major's Premonition

NOTWITHSTANDING the slow run and the near-disaster on Slide Mountain, we had our meeting with the Strathcona mine owners the following morning; and that much of the special train trip served its purpose, anyway. The boss met the miners a good bit more than half-way, and gave them their relief—and the Hatch-owned smelter its knock-out—by promising that our traffic department would make an ore tariff to the independent smelter on the other side of the range low enough to protect the producers.

They tried to give him an ovation for that—the Strathcona men—did give him a banquet luncheon at the Shaft-House Grill, a luxurious club fitted up with rough beams and rafters to make it look like its name. And on account of the banquet it was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon before we got away for the return to Portal City.

We had seen nothing of Mr. Van Britt during the day, and until we came to start out I thought maybe he had gone back to Portal City on the regular train.

But at the station I saw the pilot engine just ahead of us again, and though I couldn't be quite sure, I thought I caught a glimpse of our athletic little general superintendent on the fireman's box.

The boss was pretty quiet all the way on the run down the mountain to Bauxite, and, for a wonder, he didn't pitch into the work at the desk. Instead, he sat in one of the big wicker chairs facing a rear window, smoking, and apparently absorbed in watching the crooked track of the branch unreel itself and race backward as we slid down the grades.

I could tell pretty well what he was thinking about. For six months he had been working like a horse to pull the Short Line out of the mudhole of contempt and hostility into which a more or less justly aroused public enmity had dumped it; and now, just as he was beginning to get it up over the edge, he had been plainly notified that he was going to be killed if he didn't let go.

On the reverse curves he could see the pilot engine feeling its way down the mountain ahead of us, and I guess that gave him another twinge. It's tough on a man to think that he can't ride over his own railroad without being hedged up and guarded. But the really tough part of it was not so much the mere fact of getting killed. It was the other and sharper fact that, just as the way seemed to be opening out to better things for the Short Line, a mis-set

switch or a bullet in the dark would knock the entire hard-built reform experiment into a cocked hat.

There was every reason, now, to hope that the experiment was going to be a success, at least, at our end of it, if it could go on just a little farther. Slowly but surely the new policy was winning its way with the public. Traffic was booming, and almost from the first the Interstate Commerce inspectors had let us alone, just as the police will let a man alone when there is reason to believe that he has taken a brace and is trying his best to walk straight.

Also, for the drastic intrastate regulations—the laws about headlights, and safety devices, and grade crossings, and full crews, and the making of reports to this, that, and the other State official; laws which, if enforced to the letter would have left the railroad management with little to do but to pay the bills; for these something better was to be substituted. We had Governor-elect Burrell's assurance for this. He had met the boss in the lobby of the Bullard the day after the election, and I had heard him say:

"You have kept your promise, Norcross. For the first time in its history, your railroad has let a State campaign take its course without bullying, bribery, or underhanded corruption. You'll get your reward. We are going to have new laws, and a Railroad Commission with authority to act both ways—for the people when it's needed, and for the carriers

when they need it. If you can show that the present laws are unjust to your earning powers, you'll get relief and the people of this commonwealth will cheerfully pay the bills."

Past all this, though, and even past the murderous machinations of the disappointed grafters, there was the old sore: the original barrier that no amount of internal reform could break down. There could be no permanent prosperity for the Short Line while its majority stock was controlled by men who cared absolutely nothing for the property as a working factor in the life and activities of the region it served.

That was the way Mrs. Sheila had put it to the boss, one evening along in the summer when they were sitting out on the Kendricks' porch, and I had butted in, as usual, with a bunch of telegrams that didn't matter. She had said that the experiment *couldn't* be a success unless the conditions could be changed in some way; that so long as the railroads were owned or controlled by men of the Mr. Dunton sort and used as counters in the money-making game, there would never be any real peace between the companies and the people at large.

I knew that the boss had taken that saying of hers for another of the inspirations, and that he believed it clear through to the bottom. But I guess he didn't see any way as yet in which the Duntons could be

shaken out, or just what could be made to happen if they were shaken out.

It was at Bauxite Junction that we picked up Mr. Hornack. He had been down in the sugar-beet country on a business trip, and had come up as far as Bauxite on a freight, after the Sedgwick operator had told him that our special was on the way home from Strathcona, and that he could catch it at the Junction.

I was glad when I saw him come in. I had just been thinking that it wasn't healthy for the boss to be grilling there at the car window so long alone, and I knew Mr. Hornack would keep him talking about something or other all the rest of the way in.

For a little while they talked business, and I took my chance to stretch out on the leather lounge behind their chairs and kind of half doze off. By and by the business talk wound itself up and I heard Mr. Hornack say: "I saw Ripley going in on Number Six this morning, and he had company; Mrs. Macrae, and the major's wife, and the husky little-girl cousin. They've been visiting at the capital, so they told me, and I expect the major will be mighty glad to see them back."

I didn't hear what Mr. Norcross said, if he said anything at all, but if I had been stone deaf I think I should have heard the thing that Mr. Hornack said when he went on.

"I heard something the other day in Portal City that seems pretty hard to believe, Norcross. It was at one of Mrs. Stagford's 'evenings,' and I was sitting out a dance with a certain young woman who shall be nameless. We were speaking of the Kendricks, and she gave me a rather broad hint that Mrs. Macrae isn't a widow at all; that her husband is still living."

My heavens! I had figured out a thousand ways in which the boss might get wised up to the dreadful truth, but never anything like this; to have it dropped on him that way out of a clear sky!

For a minute or two he didn't say anything, but when he did speak, I saw that the truth wasn't going to take hold.

"That is gossip, pure and simple, Hornack. The Kendricks are my friends, and I have been as intimate in their household as any outsider could be. It's merely idle gossip, I can assure you."

"Maybe so," said Mr. Hornack, sort of drawing in his horns when he saw how positive the boss was about it. "I'm not beyond admitting that the young woman who told me is a little inclined that way. But the story was pretty circumstantial: it went so far as to assert that 'Macrae' wasn't Mrs. Sheila's married name at all, and to say that her long stay with her Western cousins was—and still is—really a

flight from conditions that were too humiliating to be borne."

"I don't care what was said, or who said it," the boss cut in brusquely. "It's ridiculous to suppose that any woman, and especially a woman like Sheila Macrae, would attempt to pass herself off as a widow when she wasn't one."

"I know," said the traffic manager, temporizing a little. "But on the other hand, I've never heard the major, or any one else, say outright that she was a widow. It seems to be just taken for granted. It stirred me up a bit on Van Britt's account. You don't go anywhere to mix and mingle socially, but it's the talk of the town that Upton is in over his head in that quarter."

I shut my eyes and held my breath. Mr. Hornack hadn't the slightest idea what thin ice he was skating over, or how this easy mention of Mr. Van Britt might be just like rubbing salt into a fresh cut. By this time it was growing dark, and we were running into Portal City, and I was mighty glad that it couldn't last much longer. The boss didn't speak again until the yard switches were clanking under the car, and then he said:

"Upton is well able to take care of himself, Hornack, and I don't think we need worry about him," and then over his shoulder to me: "Jimmie, it's time to wake up. We're pulling in."

As he always did on a return from a trip, Mr. Norcross ran up to his office to see if there was anything pressing, before he did anything else. May was still at his desk, and in answer to the boss's question he shook his head.

"No; nobody that couldn't wait," he said, referring to the day's callers. "Mr. Hatch was up with a couple of men that I didn't know, but he only wanted to inquire if you would be in the office this evening after dinner. I told him I'd find out when you came, and let him know by 'phone."

I thought, after all that had happened, Hatch certainly had his nerve to want to come and make a talk with the man his hired assassins were trying to murder. But if Mr. Norcross took that view of it, he didn't show it. On the contrary, he told Fred it would be all right to telephone Hatch; that he was coming down after dinner and the office would be open, as usual.

When things got that far along I slipped out and went to Mr. Van Britt's office at the other end of the hall. Bobby Kelso was there, holding the office down, and I asked him where I could find Tarbell. Luckily, he was able to tell me that Tarbell was at that moment down in the station restaurant, eating his supper; so down I went and butted in with my story of the Hatch call, and how it was to be repeated a little later on.

"I'll be there," said Tarbell; and with that load off my mind, I mogged off up-town to the club to get my own dinner.

When I broke into the grill-room at the railroad club, I found that Mr. Norcross had beaten me to it by a few minutes; that he had already ordered his dinner at a table with Major Kendrick. I suppose, by good rights, I ought to have gone off into a corner by myself, but I saw that the boss had tipped a chair at the end of the table where I usually sat, so I just went ahead and took it.

Coming in late, that way, I didn't get the first of the talk, but I took it that the boss had been saying something about his rare good luck in having the major for a table-mate two days in succession.

"The honoh is mine, my deah boy," the genial old Kentuckian was telling him as I sat down. "They told me in the despatchuh's office that youh special was expected in, so I telephoned Sheila and the madam not to wait for me."

"Then you stayed down town purposely to see me?" asked the boss.

"In a manneh, yes. I was by way of picking up a bit of information late this afte'noon that I thought ought to be passed on to you without any great delay."

The boss looked up quickly. "What is it, Major?"

he inquired. "Are you going to tell me that something new has broken loose?"

"I wish I might be that he'pfully definite—I do so, Graham. But I can't. It's me'uhly a bit of street talk. They're telling it, oveh at the Commercial Club, that Hatch and John Marshall—you know him,—that Sedgwick stock jobbeh who has been so active in this Citizens' Storage & Warehouse business—have finally come togetheh."

"In a business way, you mean?"

The major gave a right and left twist to his big mustaches and shrugged one shoulder.

"They are most probably calling it business," he rejoined.

The boss nodded. "I know what has happened. In spite of the fact that the local people know that their economic salvation depends upon a wide and even distribution of their C. S. & W. stock, there has been a good bit of buying and selling and swapping around. I remember you prophesied that in a little while we'd have another trust in the hands of a few men. You may recollect that I didn't dispute your prediction. I merely said that our ground leases—the fact that all of the C. S. & W. plants and buildings are on railroad land—would still give us the whip-hand over any new monopoly that might be formed."

"Yes, suh; I remember you said that," the major allowed.

"Very good. Marshall and his pocket syndicate may have acquired a voting control in C. S. & W., and they may be willing now to patch up an alliance with Hatch. But in that case the new monopoly will still lack the one vital ingredient: the power to fix prices. If there is a new combine, and it tries to make the producers and merchants pay more than the agreed percentages for storage and handling——"

"I know," the major cut in. "You-all will rise up in the majesty of youh wrath and put it out of business by terminating the leases. I hope you may: I sutt'inly do hope you may. But you'll recollect that I didn't advise you on that point, suh. You took Misteh Ripley's opinion. Maybe the cou'ts will hold with you, but, candidly, Graham, I doubt it—doubt it right much."

The boss didn't seem to be much scared up over the doubt. He just smiled and said we'd be likely to find out what was in the wind, and that before very long. Then he spoke of Hatch's afternoon call at our offices, and mentioned the fact that the Red Tower president would probably try again, later in the evening.

The major let the business matter drop, and he was working his way patiently through the salad course when he looked up to say:

"Was there anything in youh trip to Strathcona to warrant Sheila's little telegraphic dangeh signal, Graham?"

"Nothing worth mentioning," said the boss, without turning a hair; doing it, as I made sure, because he didn't want Mrs. Sheila to be mixed up in the plotting business, even by implication.

The major didn't press the inquiry any farther, and when he spoke again it was of an entirely different matter.

"Away along in the beginning, somebody—I think it was John Chadwick—spoke of you as a man with a sawt of raw-head-and-bloody-bones tempeh, Graham: what have you done with that tempeh in these heah latteh days?"

This time the boss's smile was a good-natured grin.

"Temper is not always a matter of temperament, Major. Sometimes it is only a means to an end. Much of my experience has been in the construction camps, where I have had to deal with men in the raw. Just the same, there have been moments within the past six months when I have been sorely tempted to burn the wires with a few choice words of the short and ugly variety and throw up my job."

"Which, as you may say, brings us around to President Dunton," put in the old lawyer shrewdly. "He is still opposing youh policies?"

"Up to a few weeks ago he was still hounding me to do something that would boost the stock, regardless of what the something should be, or of its effect upon the permanent value of the property."

Again the major held his peace, as if he were debating some knotty point with himself—the table-clearing giving him his chance.

"Did I undehstand you to say that these—ah—suggestions from Dunton had stopped?" he inquired, after the little coffees had been served.

"Temporarily, at least. I haven't heard anything from New York—not lately."

"Then Dunton's nephew hasn't made himself known to you?"

"Collingwood? Hardly. I'm not in Mr. Howie Collingwood's set—which is one of the things I have to be thankful for. But this is news: I didn't know he was out here."

The news-giver bent his head gravely in confirmation of the fact.

"He's heah, I'm sorry to say, Graham. He has been heah quite some little time, vibratin' round with the Grigsbys and the Gannons and a lot mo' of the new-rich people up at the capital."

It was the boss's turn to go silent, and I could guess pretty well what he was thinking. The presence of President Dunton's nephew in the West might mean much or nothing. But I could imagine

the boss was thinking that his own single experience with Collingwood was enough to make him wish that the nephew of Big Money would stay where he belonged—among the high-rollers and spenders of his own set in the effete East.

"I can't quite get the proper slant on men of the Collingwood type," he remarked, after the pause. "The only time I ever saw him was on the night before the directors' meeting last spring. He was here with his uncle's party in the special train, and that night at the Bullard he had been drinking too much and made a braying ass of himself. I had to knock him silly before I could get him up to his room."

"You did that, Graham?—for a strangeh?"

"I did it for the comfort of all concerned. As I say, he was making an ass of himself."

There was another break, and then the major looked up with a little frown.

"That was befo' you had met Sheila?" he asked, thoughtfully.

"Why, no; not exactly. It was the same night—the night we all dropped off the 'Flyer' and got left behind at Sand Creek. You may remember that we came in later on Mr. Chadwick's special."

The major made no reply to this, and pretty soon the boss was on his feet and excusing himself once more on the after-dinner smoking stunt, saying that he was obliged to go back to the office. The major

got up and shook hands with him as if he were bidding him good-by for a long journey.

"You are going down to keep that appointment with Misteh Rufus Hatch?" he said. "You take an old man's advice, Graham, my boy, and keep youh hand—figuratively speaking, of cou'se—on youh gun. It runs in my mind, somehow, that you are going to be hit—and hit right hard. No, don't ask me why. Call it a rotten suspicion, and let it go at that. Come up to the house, afte'wards, if you have time, and tell me I'm a false prophet, suh; I hope you may."

The boss promised plenty cheerfully as to the calling part, as you'd know he would since he hadn't seen Mrs. Sheila for I don't know how long; and a few minutes later we were on our way, walking briskly, to keep the Fred-May-made engagement with the chief of the grafters.

XXIV

The Dead-Line

WE found the three disappointed afternoon callers already on hand when we reached the headquarters. Fred May was back from his dinner, and he had let them in as far as the ante-room. The boss said, "Good evening, gentlemen," as pleasant as a basket of chips; told Fred he might go, and invited the waiting bunch into the private office, snapping on the lights as he opened the door.

In the big room he indicated the sitting possibilities, and the three callers planted themselves in a semicircle at the desk end. No introductions were needed. One of the pair Hatch had brought with him was a lawyer named Marrow, whose home town was Sedgwick; a sharp-nosed, ferret-eyed man who figured as one of the many "local counsels" for Red Tower. The other, Dedmon, was a political place-hunter who had once been sheriff of Arrowhead County.

"You've kept us cooling our heels in your waiting-room for just about the last time, Mr. Norcross!" was the spiteful way in which Hatch opened fire.

"We've come to talk straight business with you this trip, and it will be more to your interest than ours if you'll send your clerk away."

While they had been dragging up their chairs and sitting down, I had heard Fred May lock up his typewriter and go, and had been listening anxiously for some noise that would tell me Tarbell was on deck. I thought I heard the door of the outer office open again just as Hatch spoke and it comforted me a whole lot.

The boss didn't pay any attention to Hatch's suggestion about sending me away; acted as if he hadn't heard it. Opening his desk he took a box of cigars from a drawer and passed it. Dedmon, the ex-sheriff, helped himself, but the lawyer and Hatch both refused. With this concession to the small hospitalities the boss swung his chair to face the trio.

"My time is yours, gentlemen," he said; and Hatch jumped in like a man fairly spoiling for a fight.

"For six months, Norcross, you've been mowing a pretty wide swath out here in the tall hills. You've been posing as a little tin god before the people of this State, and all the while you've been knifing and slugging and black-jacking private capital and private business wherever and whenever they have happened to get in your way. Now, at the end of

the lane, by Jupiter, we've got you dead to rights—you and your damned railroad!"

"Cut out as many of the personalities as you can, and come to the point," suggested the boss quietly.

"You think I haven't any point to come to?" barked the grafter, with rising anger. "I'll show you! You've beaten us in the courts, and your imported lawyers have——"

"Excuse me, Mr. Hatch," was the curt interruption. "Abuse isn't argument. State your case, if you have one."

"Oh, I've got the case, all right. You've been keeping your finger on the pulse, or you think you have, but I can wise you up to a few things that have got away from you. You thought you were the only original trust-buster when you started your scheme of locally owned elevators and warehouses and coal- and lumber-yards and ran us out of business. But I'm here to tell you that your fine-haired little deal to rob us began to die about as soon as it was born."

"How so?" inquired the boss, just as though Major Kendrick hadn't already given him his pointer about the how.

"In the way that everything of that kind is bound to die. It wasn't a month before your little local stockholders began to get together and swap stock and sell it. In a very short time the control of the

whole string of local plants was in the hands of a hundred men. To-day it's in the hands of less than twenty, with John Marshall at the head of them."

This time the boss let out a notch. "So far, you haven't told me anything new. Go on."

"If I should name Marshall's bunch, you'd know what's coming to you. But we needn't go into statistics. Citizens' Storage & Warehouse is now a consolidated property, and John Marshall, Henckel and I control a majority of its stock. How does that strike you?"

"It strikes me that the people most deeply interested have been exceedingly foolish to sell their birthright. But that is strictly their own business, and not mine or the railroad company's."

"Wait!" Hatch snarled. "It's going to be both yours and the railroad company's business, before you are through with it. Marrow, here, represents Marshall, and I represent Henckel and myself. What are you going to do about those ground leases?"

"Nothing at all, except to insist upon the condition under which they were granted by the railroad company."

"Meaning that you are going to try to hold us to the fixed percentage charge for handling, packing, loading, and transferring?"

"Meaning just that. If you raise the proportional

market-price charge on the producers and merchants, the leases will terminate."

"I thought that was about where you'd land. Now listen: we're It—Marshall and Henckel and I—and what we say, goes as it lies. We are going to use the present C. S. & W. plants and equipment, charging our own storage and handling percentages, based on anything we see fit. If you pull that ground-lease business on us and try to drive us out, we'll fight you all the way up to the Supreme Court. If you beat us there, we'll merely move over to the other side of your tracks to our old Red Tower houses and yards and go on doing business at the old stand."

The boss sat back in his chair, and I could tell by the set of his jaw that he was refusing to be panic-stricken.

"You are taking altogether too much for granted, aren't you?" he put in mildly. "You are assuming that the courts will eventually nullify the terms of the ground-leases, or, if they do not, that the railroad company will do nothing to save its patrons from falling into this new graft trap."

Hatch snapped his fingers. "Now you are coming to the milk in the cocoanut!" he rapped out. "That is exactly what we're assuming. You are going to let go, once for all, Norcross. You are not going to fight us in the courts, and neither are you going

to harass us out of existence with short cars, overcharges, and the thousand and one petty persecutions that you railroad buccaneers make use of to line your own pockets!"

"But if we refuse to lie down and let you walk over us and our patrons—what then?" the boss inquired.

That brought the explosion. Hatch's eyes blazed and he smacked fist into palm.

"Then we'll knife you, and we'll do it to a velvet finish! After so long a time, we've got you where you can't side-step, Norcross. You thought you played it pretty damned fine in that election deal; but we got the goods on you, just the same!"

Again the boss refused to be panic-stricken; or, anyhow, he looked that way.

"We have heard that kind of talk many times in the past," he said. "The way to make it effective is to produce the goods."

"That's just what we're here to do!" snapped the Red Tower president vindictively. "You, and the Big Fellows in New York, want a lot of the State railroad laws repealed or amended. If you can't get that string untied, you can't gamble any more with your stock. Well and good. You came here six months ago and set out to manufacture public sentiment in favor of the railroad. You ran up your 'public-be-pleased' flag and beat the tom-tom and

blew the hewgag until you got a lot of dolts and chuckle-heads and easy marks to believe that you really meant it."

"Well, go on."

"With all this humbug and hullaballoo you still couldn't be quite certain that you had made your point; that your measures would carry through the incoming Legislature. After the primaries you counted noses among the candidates and found it was going to be a tight squeak—a damned tight squeak. Then you did what you railroad people always do; you slipped out quietly and bought a few men—just to be on the safe side."

So it was sprung at last. Hatch was accusing us of the one thing that we hadn't done; that the boss knew we hadn't done.

"I'm afraid you'll have to try again, Mr. Hatch," he said, with a sour little smile. Then he added: "Anybody can make charges, you know."

Hatch jumped to his feet and he was almost foaming at the mouth.

"Right there is where we've got you!" he shouted. "You were too cautious to put one of your own men in the field, so you sent outside for your briber. He was fly, too; he never came near you nor any of your officials—to start curious talk. But he was a stranger, and he had to have help in finding the right men to buy. Dedmon, here, was out of a job—

thanks to you and your meddling—and the steering stunt offered good pay. Do you want any more?"

The boss shook his head.

"It is a matter of complete indifference to me. I don't know in the least what you are talking about, and you'll pardon me, I hope, if I say that it doesn't greatly interest me."

"By heavens—I'll make it interest you! The easy-mark candidates were found and bought and paid for—and maybe they'll stay bought, and maybe they won't. But that isn't the point. For a little more money—my money, this time—each of these men has made an affidavit to the fact that railroad money was offered him. They don't say whether or not they accepted it, mind you, and that doesn't cut any figure. They have sworn that the money was tendered. That lets them out and lets you in. You don't believe it? I'll show you," and Hatch whipped a list of names from his pocket and slapped it upon the boss's desk. "Go to those men and ask them; if you want to carry it that far. They'll tell you."

I could see that the boss barely glanced at the list. The glib story of the bribery was like the bite of a slipping crane-hitch—slow to take hold. So far as we were concerned, of course, the charge fell flat; and upon any other hypothesis it was blankly incredible, unbelievable, absurd.

"The affidavits themselves would be much more convincing," I heard the boss say, "though even then I should wish to have reasonable proof that they were genuine."

Hatch was sitting down again and his grin showed his teeth unpleasantly.

"Do you think for a minute that I'd bring the papers here and trust them in your hands?" he rapped out insultingly. "Not much! But we've got them all right, as you'll find out if you balk and force us to use them."

At this point I could see that something in the persistent assurance of the man was getting under the boss's skin and giving him a cold chill. What if it were not the colossal bluff it had looked like in the beginning? What if . . . Like a blaze of lightning out of a clear sky a possible explanation hit me under the fifth rib, and I guess it hit the boss at about the same instant. What if President Dunton and the New York stock-jobbers, believing as they did that nothing but legislative favor would give them their trading capital in the depressed stock, had cut in and done this thing without consulting us?

The boss stirred uneasily in his chair and picked up the paper-knife—a little unconscious trick of his when he wanted time to gather himself.

"Perhaps you would be willing to give me the

name of this briber, Mr. Hatch?" he said, after a little pause.

"As if you didn't know it!" was the scoffing retort. "You drive us to the newspapers and everybody'll know it."

"But I *don't* know it," the boss insisted patiently. Then he seemed to take a sort of fresh grip on himself, for he added: "And I don't believe you do, either, Mr. Hatch. You are a pretty good bluffer, but——"

Hatch broke in with a short laugh.

"There were two of them; one who was hired to do the talking while the real wire-puller stood aside and held the coin bag. We'll skip the hired man." Then he turned to the ex-sheriff: "Write out the name of the bag-holder for him, Dedmon," he commanded, tearing a leaf from his pocket note-book and thrusting it, with a stubby pencil, into Dedmon's hands.

The man from Arrowhead County bent over his knee and wrote a name on the slip of paper, laying the slip on the drawn-out slide of the boss's desk when he had finished the slow penciling. The effect of the thing was all that any plotter could have desired. I saw the boss's face go gray, saw him stare at the slip and heard him say, half to himself, *"Howard Collingwood!"*

Hatch followed up his advantage promptly. He

was afoot and struggling into his overcoat when he said:

"You've got what you were after, Norcross, and it has got your goat. We've known all along that you were only bluffing and sparring to gain time. We've nailed you to the cross. You let this deal with Marshall and his people stand as it's made, or we'll show you up for what you are. That's the plain English of it."

"You mean that you will go to the newspapers with this?" said the boss, and it was no wonder that his voice was a bit husky.

"Just that. We'll give you plenty of time to think it over. The joint deal with C. S. & W. goes into effect to-morrow, and it's up to you to sit tight in the boat and let us alone. If you don't—if you butt in with the ground-leases, or in any other way—the story will go to the newspapers and every sucker on the line of the P. S. L. will know how you've been pulling the wool over his eyes with all this guff about 'justice first,' and 'the public be pleased.' You're no fool, Norcross. You know they won't lay it to Dunton and the New Yorkers. You've taken pains to advertise it far and wide that you are running this railroad on your own responsibility, and the people are going to take you at your word."

Dedmon, and the lawyer—who hadn't spoken a single word in all the talk—were edging toward the

door. I heard just the faintest possible little noise in the ante-room, betokening Tarbell's withdrawal. The boss didn't make any answer to Hatch's wind-up except to say, "Is that all?"

The other two were out, now, and Hatch turned to stick his ugly jaw out at the boss, and to say, just as if I hadn't been there to look on and hear him:

"No, by Jupiter—it isn't all! In the past six months you've made Gus Henckel and me lose a cold half-million, Norcross. For a less provocation than that, many a man in this neck of woods has been sent back east in the baggage-car, wearing a wooden overcoat. You climb down, and do it while you can stay alive!"

For some little time after the three men went away the boss sat staring at the slip of paper on the desk slide. At the long last he got up, sort of tired-like, I thought, and said to me: "Jimmie, you go down and see if you can find a taxi, and we'll drive out to Major Kendrick's. I promised him I'd go out to the house, you remember."

XXV

Flagged Down

WHEN our taxi stopped at the major's gate, somebody was coming out just as were getting ready to go in. The light from the street arc was broken a good bit by the sidewalk trees, and the man had the visor of his big flat golf cap pulled down well over his eyes, but I knew him just the same. It was Collingwood!

This looked like more trouble. What was the president's nephew doing here? I wondered about that, and also, if the boss had recognized Collingwood. If he had, he made no sign, and a moment later I had punched the bell-push and Maisie Ann was opening the door for us.

"Both of you? oh, how nice!" she said, with a smile for the boss and a queer little grimace for me. "Come in. This is our evening for callers. Cousin Basil is out, but he'll be back pretty soon, and he left word for you to wait if you got here before he did."

That message was for the boss, and I lagged behind in the dimly lighted hall while she was showing

him into the back parlor. I heard her wheel up a chair for him before the fire, and go on chattering to him about nothing, and by that I knew that there wasn't anybody else in the parlor and that she was just filling in the time until something else should happen.

It wasn't long until the something happened. I had dropped down on the hall settee, in the end of it next to the coat-rack, and when Mrs. Sheila came down-stairs and went through the hall, she didn't see me. A second later I heard the boss jump up and say, "At last! It seems as if you had been gone a year rather than a fortnight," and then Maisie Ann came dodging out and plunked herself down on the settee beside me.

You needn't tell me that we had no right to sit there listening; I know it well enough. On the other hand, I was just shirky enough to shift the responsibility to Maisie Ann. She didn't make any move to duck, so I didn't.

"You came out to see Cousin Basil?" Mrs. Sheila was saying to the boss. And then: "He had a telephone call from the Bullard, and he asked me to tell you to wait." After that, I guess she sat down to help him wait, for pretty soon we heard her say: "Cousin Basil has told me a little about the new trouble: have you been having another bad quarter of an hour?"

"The worst of the lot," the boss said gravely, and from that he went on to tell her about the Hatch visit and what had come of it; how the grafters had a new claw hold on him, now, made possible by an unwarranted piece of meddling on the part of the New York people in the political game.

It was while he was talking about this that Maisie Ann grabbed me by the wrist and dragged me bodily into the darkened front parlor, the door to which was just on the other side of the coat rack. I thought she had come to her right senses, at last, and was making the shift to break off the eavesdropping. That being the case, I was simply horrified when I found that she was merely fixing it so that we could both *see* and hear. The sliding doors between the two parlors were cracked open about an inch, and before I realized what she was doing she had pulled me down on the floor beside her, right in front of that crack.

"If you move or make a noise, I'll scream and they'll come in here and find us both!" she hissed in my ear; and because I didn't know what else to do with such a kiddish little termagent, I sat still. It was dastardly, I know; but what was I to do?

The first thing we saw was that the two in the other room were sitting at opposite sides of the fire. Mrs. Sheila was awfully pretty; prettier than I had

ever seen her, because she had a lot more color in her face, and her eyes had that warm glow in them that even the grayest eyes can get when there is a human soul behind them, and the soul has got itself stirred up about something.

When the boss finished telling her about the Hatch talk, she said: "You mean that Mr. Dunton and his associates sent somebody out here to influence the election?"

The boss looked up sort of quick.

"Yes; that is it, precisely. But how did you know?"

"You made the inference perfectly plain," she countered. "I have a reasoning mind, Graham; haven't you discovered it before this?"

The boss nodded soberly. "I have discovered a good many things about you during the past six months: one of them is that there was never another woman like you since the world began."

Knowing, as I did, that she had a husband alive and kicking around somewhere, it seemed as if I just couldn't stay there and listen to what a break of that kind on the boss's part was likely to lead up to. But Maisie Ann gripped my wrist until she hurt.

"You *must* listen!" she whispered fiercely. "You're taking care of him, and you've *got* to know!"

As on many other earlier occasions, Mrs. Sheila slid away from the sentimental side of things just as easy as turning your hand over.

"You are too big a man to let an added difficulty defeat you now," she remarked calmly, going back to the business field. "You are really making a miraculous success. I have just spent two weeks in the capital, as you know, and everybody is talking about you. They say you are in a fair way to solve the big problem—the problem of bringing the railroads and the people together in a peaceable and profitable partnership—which is as it should be."

"It can be done; and I could do it right here on the Pioneer Short Line if I didn't have to fight so many different kinds of devils at the same time," said the boss, scowling down at the fire in the grate. And then with a quick jerk of his head to face her: "You sent the major a wire from the capital last night, telling him to persuade me not to go to Strathcona. Why did you do it? And how did you know I was thinking of going?"

For the first time in the whole six months I saw Mrs. Sheila get a little flustered, though she didn't show it much, only in a little more color in her cheeks.

"Some day, perhaps, I may tell you, but I can't now," she said sort of hurriedly. And then: "You mustn't ask me."

"But you did send the wire?"

"Yes."

"And you also sent another to Upton Van Britt?"

"I did."

The boss smiled. "That second message was an after-thought. You were afraid I'd be stubborn and go, anyway. That was some more of your marvelous inner reasoning. Tell me, Sheila, did you know that there was going to be a broken rail-joint set to kill me on that trip?"

That got her in spite of her heavenly calm and I could see her press her pretty lips together hard.

"Was that what they did?" she asked, a bit trembly.

He nodded. "Van Britt was on the pilot engine ahead of my car, and he found it. There was no harm done. It was bad enough, God knows, to set a trap that would have killed everybody on my train; but this other thing that has been pulled off to-night is even worse. Mr. Dunton and his unprincipled followers have set a thing on foot here which is due to grind us all to powder. Past that, they have contrived to handcuff me so that I can't make a move without pulling down consequences of a personal nature upon President Dunton, himself."

"Now my 'marvelous inner reasoning' has gone quite blind," she said, with a queer little smile. "You'll have to explain."

"It's simple enough," said the boss shortly. "If Mr. Dunton had sent only hired emissaries out here to bribe the members of the Legislature—but he didn't; he included a member of his own family."

I was looking straight at Mrs. Sheila as he spoke, and I saw a sudden frightened shock jump into the slate-gray eyes. Just for a second. Before you could count one, it was gone and she was saying quietly:

"A member of his own family? That is very singular, isn't it?"

"It is, and it isn't. The man who was sent with the bribe money has every qualification for the job, I should say, save one—discretion. And I'm not sure that he may not be discreet enough, when he isn't drunk."

Again I saw the curious look in her eyes, and this time it was almost like the shrinking from a blow.

"Was there — was this thing that was done actually criminal?" she asked, just breathing it at him.

"It was, indeed. The election laws of this State have teeth. It is a penitentiary offense to bribe either the electorate or the law-makers."

There was silence for a little time, and she was no longer looking at him; she was staring into the heart of the glowing coals in the grate basket. By and by she said: "You haven't told me this man's

name—the one who did the bribing; may I know it?"

I knew just what the boss was going to do, and he did it; took the slip of paper that Dedmon had written on from his pocket and passed it across to her. If there was another shock for her none of us could see it. She had her face turned away when she looked at the name on the paper. Pretty soon she said, sort of drearily:

"Once you told me that the true test of any human being came when he was asked to eliminate the personal factor; to efface himself completely in order that his cause might prosper. Do you still believe that?"

"Of course. It's all in the day's work. Any cause worth while is vastly bigger than any man who is trying to advance it."

"Than any man, yes; but for a woman, Graham; wouldn't you allow something for the woman?"

"I thought we had agreed long ago that there is no double standard, either in morals or ethics—one thing for the man and another for the woman. That is your own attitude, isn't it?"

She didn't say whether it was or not. She was holding the bit of paper he had given her so that the light from the fire fell upon it when she said: "I suppose your duty is quite clear. In the slang of the street, you must 'beat Mr. Hatch to it.' You

must be the first to denounce this bribery, clearing yourself and letting the axe fall where it will. You owe that much to yourself, to the men who have fought shoulder to shoulder with you, and to that wider circle of the public which is beginning to believe that you are honest and sincere, don't you?"

The boss was shaking his head a bit doubtfully.

"It isn't quite so simple as that," he objected. "I don't know that I'd have any compunctions about sending Collingwood to the dump. If the half of what they say of him is true, he is a spineless degenerate and hardly worth saving. But to do as you suggest would be open rebellion, you know; while Dunton remains president, I am his subordinate, and if I should expose him and his nephew, the situation here would become simply impossible."

"Well?" she prompted.

"Such a move would rightly and properly bring a wire demand for my resignation, of a nature that couldn't be ignored—only it wouldn't, because I should anticipate it by resigning first. That is a small matter, introducing the personal element which we have agreed should be eliminated. But the results to others; to the men of my staff and the rank and file, and to the public, which, as you say, is just beginning to realize some of the benefits of a real partnership with its principal railroad; these things can't be so easily ignored."

"You have thought of some other expedient?"

"No; I haven't got that far yet. But I am determined that Hatch shall not be allowed to work his graft a second time upon the people who are trusting me. I believe in the new policy we are trying out. I'd fling my own fortune into the gap if I had one, and, more than that, I'd pull in every friend I have in the world if by so doing I could stand the Pioneer Short Line upon a solid foundation of honest ownership. That is all that is needed in the present crisis—absolutely all."

He was on his feet now and tramping back and forth on the hearth rug. At one of his back-turnings I saw Mrs. Sheila reach out quickly and lay the bit of paper with its accusing scrawl on the glowing coals. Then she said, quite calm again:

"In time to come you will accomplish even that, Graham—this change of ownership that we have talked of and dreamed about. It is the true solution of the problem; not Government ownership, but ownership by the people who have the most at stake —the public and the workers. You are a strong man, and you will bring it about. But this other man—who is not strong; the man whose name was written upon the bit of paper I have just thrown into the fire. . . ."

He wheeled quickly, and what he said made me feel as if a cold wind were blowing up the back of

my neck, because I hadn't dreamed that he would remember Collingwood well enough to recognize him in that passing moment on the sidewalk.

"That man," he muttered, sort of gratingly: "I had completely forgotten. He was here just a little while ago. I met him as I was coming in. Did he come to see your cousin—the major?"

"No," she said, matching his low tone; "he came to see me."

"You?"

"Yes. Finding himself in a pitfall which he has digged with his own hands, he is like other men of his kind; he would be very glad to climb out upon the shoulders of a woman."

I guess the boss saw red for a minute, but the question he asked had to come.

"By what right did he come to you, Sheila?"

"By what he doubtless thinks is the best right in the world. He is my husband."

It was out at last, and the boss's poor little house of cards that I knew he had been building all these months had got its knock-down in just those four quietly spoken words. Maisie Ann was still gripping my wrist, and I felt a hot tear go splash on my hand. "Oh, I could *kill* him!" she whispered, meaning Collingwood, I suppose.

As well as I knew him, I couldn't begin to guess

what the boss would do or say. But he was such a splendid fighter that I might have known.

"I heard, no longer ago than this afternoon, that you were not—that your husband was still living," he said, speaking very gently. "I didn't believe it—not fully—though I saw that there might easily be room for the belief. It makes no difference, Sheila. You are my friend, and you are blameless. But before we go any farther I want you to believe that I wouldn't have been brutal enough to give you that bit of paper if I had remotely suspected that Collingwood was the man."

She didn't make any answer to that, and after a while he said:

"Having told me so much, can't you tell me a little more?"

"There isn't much to tell, and even the little is commonplace and—and disgraceful," she replied, with a touch of weariness that was fairly heartbreaking. "Don't ask me why we were married; I can't explain that, simply because I don't know, myself. It was arranged between the two families, and I suppose Howie and I always took it for granted. I can't even plead ignorance, for I have known him all my life."

"Go on," said the boss, still speaking as gently as a brother might have.

"Howie was a spoiled child, an only son, and he

is a spoiled man. I stood it as long as I could—I hope you will believe that. But there are some things that a woman cannot stand, and——"

"I know," he broke in. "So you came out here to be free."

"It is four years since we have lived together," she went on, "and for a long time I hoped he would never find out where I was. There was no divorce: I couldn't endure the thought of the publicity and the—the disgrace. When I came here to Cousin Basil's there was no attempt made to hide the facts; or at least the one chief fact that I was a married woman. But on the other hand, I had taken my mother's name, and only Cousin Basil and his wife knew that I was not what perhaps every one else took me to be,—a widow with a dead husband instead of a living one."

"Did Collingwood try to find you?"

"No, I think not. But when he was here last spring with his Uncle Breckenridge he saw me and found out that I was living here with Cousin Basil."

"Did he try to persecute you?"

"No, not then. I was afraid of only one thing: that he might drink too much and—and talk. Part of the fear was realized. He saw me that Sunday night in the Bullard. That was why he was trying to fight the hotel people—because they wouldn't let him come up-stairs. I saw what you did, and I was

sorry. I couldn't help feeling that in some way it would prove to be the beginning of a tragedy."

"You saw no more of him then?"

"No; I neither saw him nor heard of him until about a month ago when he came west with a man named Bullock—a New York attorney. I didn't know why he came, but I thought it was to annoy me."

"And he has annoyed you?"

"Until this night he has never missed an opportunity of doing so when he could dodge Cousin Basil. Caring nothing for me himself, he has taken violent exceptions to my friendship with you and with Upton Van Britt, though that is chiefly when he has been drinking too much. It was his taunting boast yesterday at the capital that led me to telegraph Cousin Basil and Upton Van Britt about your trip to Strathcona. He knew that you were going to the gold camp, and he declared to me that vou'd never come back alive."

"But to-night," the boss persisted. "What did he want to-night?"

"He wanted to—to use me. He said that he had 'put something across' for his uncle, that he had gotten into trouble for it, and that—to use his own phrase again, you were the man who would try to 'get his goat.' "

"And his object in telling you this?"

"Was entirely worthy of the man. He asked me, or rather I should say, commanded me, to 'choke you off.' And, of course, he added the insult. He said I was the one who could do it."

The boss had gone to tramping again and when he stopped to face her I could see that he had threshed his way around to some sort of a conclusion.

"Without intending to, you have tied my hands," he said gravely. "I wasn't meaning to spare Collingwood if there were any way in which I could use him as a club to knock Hatch out of the game."

"But now you won't use him?"

"You might justly write me down as a pretty poor friend of yours if I should—after what you have told me."

"I haven't asked you to spare him."

"No, I know you haven't. But the fact remains that he is your husband. I——"

The interruption was the opening and closing of the front door and the heavy tread of the major in the hall. In a flash Mrs. Sheila was up and getting ready to vanish through the door that led to the dining-room. With her hand on the door-knob she shot a quick question at the boss.

"How much will you tell Cousin Basil?"

"Nothing of what you have told me."

"Thank you," she whispered back; "you are as

big in your friendship as you are in other ways." And with that she was gone.

It was right along in the same half-minute, while the boss was standing with his back to the fire and the major was going in to talk to him, that I lost Maisie Ann. I don't know where she went, or how. She had let go of my wrist, and when I groped for her she was gone. Since I didn't see any good reason why I should stay and spy upon the boss and the major, I slipped out to the hall and curled up on the big settee beyond the coat rack; curled up, and after listening a while to the drone of voices in the farther room, went to sleep.

It was away deep in the night when the boss took hold of me and shook me awake. The long talk was just getting itself finished, and the major had come to the door with his guest.

"We must manage to pull Collingwood out of it in some way," the major was saying. "I don't love the damn' scoundrel any betteh than you do, Graham; but thah's a reason—a fam'ly reason, as you might say." Then he switched off quickly. "You haven't asked me yet why I ran away from home this evenin' when I was expecting you."

"No," said the boss. "Sheila told me that you had a telephone call to the Bullard."

The old Kentuckian chuckled.

"Yes, suh; and you'd neveh guess in a thousand

yeahs who sent the call, or what was wanted. It was ouh friend Hatch, and no otheh. And he had the face to offer me ten thousand dollahs a yeah to act as consulting counsel for him against the railroad company!"

"Of course you accepted," said the boss, meaning just the opposite

The major chuckled again. "I talked with him long enough to find out about where he stood. He thinks he's got you by the neck, but, like most men of his breed, he's a paltry coward, suh, at heart."

The boss laughed. "What is he afraid of?"

"He's afraid of his life. He told me, with his eyes buggin' out, that thah was one man heah in Portal City who would kill him to get possession of certain papehs that were locked up in the cash vault of the Security National."

The boss was pulling on his gloves.

"I didn't give him any reason to think that I was anxious to murder him," he said.

"Oh, no, my deah boy; it isn't you, at all. It's Howie Collingwood. Thah's where we land afteh all is said and done. Youh hands are tied, and we've got this heah young maniac to deal with. If Collingwood gets about three fingehs of red likkeh under his belt, why, thah's one murder in prospect. And if Hatch has any reason to think that you can still get the underholt on him, why, thah's another.

I'm glad you've seen fit to take Ripley's advice at last, and got you a body-guard."

"What's that?" queried the boss. But the query was answered a minute later when we hit the sidewalk for the tramp back to town and Tarbell fell in to walk three steps behind us all the way to the door of the railroad club.

It sure did look as if things were just about as bad as they could ever be, now. Hutch once more on top, the whole bottom knocked out of the railroad experiment, our good name for political honesty gone glimmering, and, worst of all, perhaps, the boss's big heart broken right in two over those four little words that nothing could ever rub out—"he is my husband." I didn't wonder that the boss said never a word in all that long walk down-town, or that he forgot to tell me good-night when he locked himself up in his room at the club.

XXVI

The Dipsomaniac

IN a day when bunched money, however arrogant it may be, has been taught to go sort of softly, the Hatch people were careful not to make any public announcement of the things they were doing or going to do. But bad news has wings of its own. Mr. Norcross was still in the midst of his mail dictation to me the morning after the bottom—all the different bottoms—fell out, when Mr. Hornack came bulging in.

"What's all this fire-alarm that's been sprung about a new elevator trust?" he demanded, chewing on his cigar as if it were something he were trying to eat. "It's all over town that C. S. & W. has been secretly reorganized, with the Hatch crowd in control. I'm having a perfect cyclone of telephone calls asking what, and how, and why."

The boss's reply ignored the details. "We're in for it again," he announced briefly. "The local companies couldn't hold on to a good thing when they had it. The stock has been swept up, first into little heaps, and then into big ones, and now the Hatch people have forced a practical consolidation."

"Is that the fact?—or only the way you are doping it out?" queried the traffic manager.

"It is the fact. Hatch came here last night to tell me about it; also, to tell me where we were to get off."

Hornack bit off a piece of the chewed cigar and took a fresh hold on it.

"Does he think for one holy half minute that we're going to sit down quietly and let him undo all the good work that's been done?" he rasped.

"He does—just that. He's putting us in the nine-hole, Hornack, and up to the present moment I haven't found the way to climb out of it."

"But the ground leases?" Hornack began. "Why can't we pull them on him?"

"We might, if we hadn't been shot dead in our tracks by the very men who ought to be backing us to win," said the boss soberly. And then he went on to tell about the new grip Hatch had on us.

Of course, Hornack blew up at that, and what he said wasn't for publication. For a minute or so the air of the office was blue. When he got down to common, ordinary English again he was saying, between cusses: "But you can't let it stand at that, Norcross; you simply *can't!*"

"I don't intend to," was the even-toned rejoinder. "But anything we can do will always lack the element of finality, Hornack, while Wall Street owns

us. I've said it a hundred times and I'll say it again: the only hope for the public service corporation today lies in a distribution of its securities among the people it actually serves."

Hornack's teeth met in the middle of the chewed cigar.

"That's excellent logic—bully good logic, if anybody should ask you! But we're fighting a condition, not a theory. Nobody wants P. S. L. Common even at thirty-two. You wouldn't advise your worst enemy to buy it at that figure."

"I don't know," said the boss, kind of musingly. "You're forgetting the water that's been put into it from time to time by the speculators and reorganizers; there has been a good deal of that, first and last. Nevertheless, value for value, you know, and I know, that the property is worth more than thirty-two, including the bonds. What I mean is that if anybody would buy the control at that figure,—the control, mind you, and not merely a minority—and handle the road purely as a dividend-earning business proposition, he wouldn't lose money; he'd make money—a lot of it."

"All of which doesn't get us anywhere in the present pinch," returned the traffic manager. "I suppose we'll have to wait until Hatch makes his first move, and I've still got fight enough left in me to hope that he'll make it suddenly. Punch the button

for me if anything new develops. I'm going back to swing on to my telephone."

Following this talk with Hornack there was a try-out with Billoughby and Juneman, but as this three-cornered conference was held in the private room of the suite, I don't know what was said. A little farther along, when the boss was once more whittling at the dictation, Mr. Van Britt strolled in. Mr. Norcross told me to take my bunch of notes to May and then he gave Mr. Van Britt his inning, starting off with: "Well, how is the general superintendent this fine morning?"

Mr. Van Britt wrinkled his nose.

"The general superintendent is wondering, one more time, why under the starry heavens he is out here in this country that God has forgotten, scrapping for a living on this one-horse railroad of yours when he might be in good little old New York, living easy and clipping coupons in the safety-deposit room of a Broad Street bank."

The boss laughed at that, and I'm telling you right now that I was glad to know that he was still able to laugh.

"You've never seen the day when you wanted to renege, Upton, and you know it," he hit back. "Think of the perfectly good technical education you were wasting when I took hold of you and jerked you out here."

"Huh!" said our millionaire; "I've got other things to think of. I've just had two enginemen on the carpet for running over an old ranchman's pet cow. They said they couldn't help it; but I told them that under the 'public-be-pleased' policy, they'd got to help it."

Again the boss chuckled. "I believe you'd joke at your own funeral, Upton. You didn't come here to tell me about the ranchman's pet cow."

"Not exactly. I came to tell you that Citizens' Storage & Warehouse is due to have a strike on its hands. The management—which seems to have got itself consolidated in some way—shot out a lot of new bosses all along the line on the through train last night, and this morning the entire works, elevators, packeries, coal yards, lumber millers, and everything, are posted with notices of a blanket cut in wages; twenty per cent, flat, for everybody. The news has been trickling in over the wires all morning; and the last word is that a general strike of all C. S. & W. employees will go on at noon to-morrow."

"That is move number one," said the boss. And then: "You have heard that the Hatch people have reached out and taken in the C. S. & W.?"

"Hornack was telling me something about it; yes."

"It is true; and the fight is on. You see what Hatch is doing. At one stroke he gets rid of all the

local employees of C. S. & W., who have been drawing good pay and who might make trouble for him a little later on, and fills their places with strike-breakers who have no local sympathizers."

"But there will be another result which he may not have counted upon," Mr. Van Britt put in. "The blanket cut serves notice upon everybody that once more the old strong-arm monopoly is in the saddle. The newspapers will tell us about it to-morrow morning. Also, a good many of them will be asking us what *we* are going to do about it; whether we are going to fight the new monopoly as we did in the old, or stand in with the graft, as our predecessors did."

"We needn't go over that ground again—you and I, Upton," said Mr. Norcross. "You know where I stand. But the conditions have changed. We have been knifed in the back." And with that he gave the stocky little operating chief a crisp outline of the new situation precipitated by the Dunton-Collingwood political bribery.

Mr. Van Britt took it quietly, as he did most things, sitting with his hands in his pockets and smiling blandly where Hornack had exploded in wrathful profanity. At the wind-up he said:

"Old Uncle Breckenridge is one too many for you, Graham. You can't stand the gaff—this new gaff of Hatch's; and neither can you go before the

people as the accuser of your president—and hope to hold your job. The one thing for you to do is to lock up your office and walk out."

"Upton, if I thought you meant that—but I never know when to take you seriously."

"The two enginemen who ran over the ranchman's pet cow had no such difficulty, I assure you. And isn't it good advice? You know, as well as I do, that Chadwick is holding you here by main strength; that you can never accomplish anything permanent while Dunton and his cronies are at the steering-wheel. It might be different if you had the local backing of your constituency—the people served by the Short Line. But you haven't that; up to date, the people are merely interested spectators."

"Go on," said the boss, frowning again.

"They have a stake in the game—the biggest of the stakes, as a matter of fact—but it isn't sufficiently apparent to make them climb in and fight for you. They are saying, with a good bit of reason, that, after all is said and done, Big Money—Wall Street—still has the call, and any twenty-four hours may see the whole thing slump back into graft and crooked politics."

"It is so true that you might be reading it out of a book," was the boss's comment. And then: "What's the answer?"

Mr. Van Britt shook his head. "I don't know. If you had money enough to buy the voting control in P. S. L. you might get somewhere; but as it is, you're like a cat in Hades without claws."

"Tell me," said Mr. Norcross, after a little pause: "You're a native New Yorker: do you know this man Collingwood?"

"Only by hearsay. He is what our English friends call a 'blooming bounder'; fast yachts, fast motor-cars, the fast set generally. It's a pretty bad case of money-spoil, I fancy. They say he wasn't always a total loss."

"Did you ever hear that he was married?"

"Oh, yes; he married a Kentucky girl some years ago: I don't remember her name. They say she stood him for about six months and then dropped out. I suppose he needs killing for that."

At this the boss went a step farther, saying: "He does, indeed, Upton. I happen to know the young woman."

That was when Mr. Van Britt fired his own little bomb-shell. "So do I," he answered quietly.

"But you said you had forgotten her name!"

"So I have—her married name. And what's more, I mean to keep on forgetting it."

There was no mistake about the boss's frown this time.

"That won't do, Upton," he said, kind of warningly.

"It will do well enough for the present. I'd marry her to-morrow, Graham, if she were free, and there were no other obstacles. Unhappily, there are two —besides the small legal difficulty; she doesn't care for my money—having a little of her own; and she happens to be in love with the other fellow."

I guess the boss was remembering what Mrs. Sheila had told him in that confidence before the back-parlor fire, about its being all off between her and Collingwood, for he said: "I think you are mistaken as to that last."

"No, I'm not mistaken. But that's neither here nor there. Neither you nor I can send Collingwood to the penitentiary—that's a cinch. Wherefore, I'm advising you to quit, walk out, jump the job."

At that the boss took a fresh brace, righting his swing chair with a snap.

"You know very little about me, Upton, if you think I'm going to throw up my hands now, when the real pinch has come. A while back I might have done it, but now I'll fight until I'm permanently killed. I have a scheme—if it could only be worked. But it can't be worked on a rising market. I suppose you have seen the morning's quotations. By some trick or other, the Dunton people are boosting the stock again. It went up three points yesterday.

Mr. Van Britt grinned. "They're discounting the effect of this little political deal—which will at least rope your reform scheme down, if it doesn't do anything else. What you need is a good, old-fashioned cataclysm of some sort; something that would fairly knock the tar out of P. S. L. securities and send them skittering down the toboggan slide in spite of anything Uncle Breckenridge could do to stop them; down to where they could be safely and profitably picked up by the dear public. Unfortunately, those things don't happen outside of the story books. If they did, if the earthquake should happen along our way just now, I don't know but I'd be disloyal enough to get out and help it shake things up a bit."

After Mr. Van Britt had gone, the boss put in the remainder of the day like a workingman, skipping the noon luncheon as he sometimes did when the work drive was extra heavy. Meanwhile, as you'd suppose, rumor was plentifully busy, on the railroad, and also in town.

By noon it was well understood that there had been a radical change in the management of C. S. & W., and that there was going to be a general strike in answer to the slashing cut in wages. I slipped up-town to get a bite while Fred May was spelling me at the dictation desk, and I heard some of the talk. It was pretty straight, most of it—which

shows how useless it is to try to keep any business secrets, nowadays.

For example: the three men at my table in the Bullard grill-room—they didn't know me or who I was—knew that a council of war had been called in the railroad headquarters, and that Ripley had been pulled in by wire from Lesterburg, and that we were rushing around hurriedly to provide storage room for the wheat shippers in case of a tie-up, and that we were arranging to distribute railroad company coal in case the tie-up should bring on a fuel famine—knew all these things and talked about them.

They were facts, as far as they went—these things. The boss hadn't been idle during the forenoon, and he kept up the drive straight through to quitting time. Word was brought in during the afternoon by Tarbell that the Hatch people were wiring the Kansas City and Omaha employment agencies and placing hurry orders for strike-breakers. The boss's answer to this was a peremptory wire to our passenger agents at both points to make no rate concessions whatever, of any kind, for the transportation of laborers under contract. It was a shrewd little knock. Labor of that kind is mighty hard to move unless it can get free transportation or a low rate of fare, and I could see that Mr. Norcross was hoping to keep the strike-breakers away.

When six o'clock came, the boss asked May to stay and keep the office open while I could go downstairs and get my dinner in the station restaurant, and he went off up-town—to the club, I suppose. After I'd had my bite, I let May go. Everything was moving along all right, so far as anybody could see. We had five extra fuel trains loading at the company's chutes at Coalville, and the despatcher was instructed to work them out on the line during the night, distributing them to the towns that had reported shortages. They were not to be turned over to the regular coal yards; they were to be sidetracked and held for emergencies.

Mr. Norcross came back about eight o'clock, and I gave him my report of how things were going on the line. A little later Mr. Cantrell dropped in, and there was a quiet talk about the situation, and what it was likely to develop. The *Mountaineer* editor was given all the facts, except the one big one about Hatch's death-grip on us, and in turn Mr. Cantrell promised the help of his paper to the last ditch—though, of course, he had no idea of how deep that last ditch was going to be. I had a lot of filing and indexing to do, and I kept at work while they were talking, wondering all the time if the boss would venture to tell the editor about the depth of that "last ditch." He didn't. I guess he thought he wouldn't until he had to.

It was pretty nearly nine o'clock when the editor went away, and Mr. Norcross was just saying to me that he guessed we'd better knock off for the night, when we both heard a step in May's room. A second later the door was pushed open and a man came in, making for the nearest chair and flinging himself into it as if he'd reached the limit. It was Collingwood. He was chewing on a dead cigar and his face was like the face of a corpse. But he was sober.

Naturally, I supposed he had come to make trouble with the boss on Mrs. Sheila's account, and I quietly edged open the drawer of my desk where I kept Fred May's automatic, so as to be ready. He didn't waste much time.

"I saw you as I was coming away from Kendrick's last night," he began, with a bickering rasp in his voice. "Did you go up against the gun I had loaded for you?"

Mr. Norcross cut straight through to the bottom of that little complication at a single stroke.

"What Mrs. Collingwood said to me, or what I said to her, can have no possible bearing upon anything that you may have to say to me, or that I can consent to listen to, Mr. Collingwood."

The derelict sat up in his chair.

"But you've got to keep hands off, just the same; at Kendrick's, and in this other business, too. If

you don't, there is going to be blood on the moon! Get me?"

The boss never batted an eye. "I'm taking it for granted that you are sober, Mr. Collingwood," he said. "If you are, you must surely know that threats are about the poorest possible weapons you can use just now."

"It's a plant, from start to finish!" gritted the man in the chair. "I haven't done a damned thing more than to cash a few checks for—for expenses, and turn the money over to Bullock. Now Hatch tells me that I was working with a spotter—his spotter—and that he can send me up for bribery. It's a lie. I don't know what Bullock did with the money, and I don't want to know."

"But you had orders to give it to him when he required it, didn't you?" Mr. Norcross cut in.

"That's none of your business. I want you to choke this man Hatch off of me!"

The boss had picked up his paper-knife. "I don't know why you should come to me for help," he said. "You have been hand-in-glove with these conspirators ever since you came out here. You have known what they were doing to destroy the railroad property and wreck our trains, and two days ago you knew that they had set a trap for my special train on the Strathcona branch—a trap that was meant to kill me."

It was a random shot, and I knew that Mr. Norcross was just guessing at where it might land when he fired it. But it went home; oh, you bet it went home!

"Damn you!" gurgled the bounder, half starting to his feet. "Why shouldn't I want to see you killed? And what do I care what becomes of your cursed railroad? Haven't you done enough to me?"

"No!" the word was slammed at him like a bullet. And then: "As I told you in the beginning, we won't go into any phase of it that involves Mrs. Collingwood. Get back into your own boat. Are you trying to tell me now that Hatch is threatening you?"

"He's played me for a come-on. He says he's got the whole business down in black and white, with affidavits, and all that. He had the nerve to tell me less than an hour ago that he'd burn me alive if I didn't toe the mark."

"What does he want you to do?"

"He wants me to stick around here so that he can use me against you. He knows how you're mixed up with Sheila and that you can't turn a wheel without making it look as if you were going after me on your own personal account."

There was silence for a little time, and the crackle of the match with which Mr. Norcross relighted his cigar smashed into the stillness like a tiny pistol shot.

It was an awful muddle, with bloody murder sticking out of it on every side.

"If you have come here with the idea that I can force Hatch's hand, you are very much misled," said the boss, at the close of the electric pause. And then: "Has he made it appear to you that he was merely trying to help you avenge your own fancied wrongs?"

"He said I ought to get you; that any man who would make love to a married woman ought to be got."

My chief was looking past the derelict and out through the darkened window.

"You don't know me, Mr. Collingwood, but you do know your wife; and you know that she is as far above suspicion as the angels in heaven. Let that part of it go. Hatch was merely using you for his own ends. If he could persuade you to kill me off out of the way, it would be merely that much gained in the business fight. You haven't done it thus far, and now he is using your check-cashing excursion as a club with which he proposes to brain the entire railroad management, your uncle included, if we interfere with his plans."

Collingwood scowled up at the ceiling, shifting the dead cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"So that's the way of it, is it?" he commented.

"He was working for his own pocket all the time, and Uncle Breck stands pat and slips him the ace he was needing to make his hand a winner. Between you and me, Norcross, I believe this damned piker needs killing a few times, himself."

The boss sat back in his swing chair and I could just imagine that he was trying to get some sort of proper angle on this young fellow who, in addition to his other scoundrelisms, big and little, had wrecked the life of Sheila Macrae. I knew what he was thinking. He had a theory that no man that was ever born was either all angel or all devil, and he was hunting for the redeeming streak in this one.

When you looked right hard at the haggard face you could see something sort of half-appealing in it; something to make you think that perhaps, away back yonder before the spoiling began, there used to be a man; never a strong man, I guess, but one that might have been generous and free-hearted, maybe. I got a fleeting little glimpse of that back-number man when he turned suddenly and said:

"One night a few weeks ago when I was full up, Hatch got hold of me and told me you were out at the Kendrick place with Sheila. He made me believe that I ought to go out there and kill you, and I started to do it. Do you know why I didn't do it?"

"No," said the chief, mighty quietly.

"Well, I'll tell you. One night last spring up at the Bullard you slammed me one in the face and dragged me off to my room to keep me from making a bigger ass of myself than I'd already made. I haven't forgotten that. In all these crooked years, nobody else has ever taken the trouble to chuck me decently out of sight and give me a chance to brace. Drunk as I was, I remembered it that night when I was climbing up to a window in the major's house and trying to get a shot at you."

Mr. Norcross shook his head, more than half sympathetically, I thought.

"Let that part of it go and tell me about this other trouble," he said. "How badly are you tangled up in this political business?"

"I've given it to you straight on the bribing proposition. Uncle Breck used me as a money carrier because—well, maybe it was because he couldn't trust Bullock. I didn't know definitely what Bullock was doing with the checks I cashed for him, though I supposed, of course, it was something that wouldn't stand daylight. It was only a side issue with me. I was coming out here anyway. I knew Sheila had made up her mind—God knows she's had cause enough; but I had a crazy notion that I'd like to be on the same side of the earth with her again for just a little while. Then this—" he trailed off in a bab-

ble of maledictions poured out upon the man who had trapped him and used him.

The boss straightened himself in his chair, but he still was speaking gently when he said:

"You are not asking my advice, and I don't owe you anything, personally, Mr. Collingwood. But I'll say to you what I might say to a better man in like circumstances. You have done all the harm you can, but, as I see it, there doesn't seem to be any need of your staying here to suffer the consequences. Why don't you go back to New York, taking your wife with you, if she will go?"

Collingwood's smile was a mere teeth-baring grimace.

"Sheila made her wedding journey with me once, when she was just eighteen. The next time she rides with me it will be at my funeral. Oh, I've earned it, and I'm not kicking. And about this other thing: I can't duck. You know what Hatch is holding me for. He told me just a little while ago that if I stepped aboard of a train, I'd be arrested before the train could pull out."

It was a handsome little precaution on the part of the chief of the grafters. If a fight should be precipitated—if the boss should try to checkmate the C. S. & W. gobble—the arrest and indictment of President Dunton's nephew would serve bully good and well as a dramatic bit of side play to keep the

newspapers from printing too much about the other thing.

"If you really want to go, I think it can be arranged in some way, in spite of Hatch and his bluffing," Mr. Norcross put in quietly. "So far as our railroad troubles are concerned it will neither help nor hinder for you to stay on here, now."

As if the helpful suggestion had been a lighted match to fire a hidden mine of rage, Collingwood sprang to his feet with his dull eyes ablaze.

"No, by God!" he swore. "I'm going to make him come across with those affidavit papers first! You wait right here, Norcross. You think I'm all cur, but I'll show you. There isn't much left of me but hound dog, but even a hound dog will bite if you kick him hard enough. Lend me a gun, if you've got one and I'll——"

"Hold on—none of that!" the boss broke in sternly, jumping out of his chair to enforce the command. But before he could make the grabbing move the corridor door slammed noisily and the madman was gone.

XXVII

The Deserter

MR. NORCROSS chased out and tried to overtake Collingwood, going as far as the foot of the stairs. I went, too, but got only far enough to meet the boss coming up again. There was nothing doing. The station policeman had seen the crazy rounder jump into a taxi and go spinning off uptown.

That settled the Collingwood business for the time being, but there was another jolt waiting for us when we got back to the office. While we were both out, Mr. Van Britt had blown in from his room at the foot of the hall and we found him lounging comfortably in the chair that Collingwood had just vacated.

"I thought maybe you'd turn up again pretty soon, since you'd left the doors all open," was the way he started out. Then: "Sit down, Graham; I want to talk a few lines."

Mr. Norcross took his own chair and twirled it to face the general superintendent. "Say it," he commanded briefly.

Mr. Van Britt hooked his thumbs in his armholes.

"I've just been figuring a bit on the general outlook: you have a decently efficient operating outfit here, what with Perkins and Brant and Conway handling the three divisions as self-contained units. You don't need a general superintendent any more than a monkey needs two tails."

"What are you driving at?" was the curt demand.

"Well, suppose we say retrenchment, for one thing. As I size it up, you might just as well be saving my salary. It would buy a good many new cross-ties in the course of a year."

"That's all bunk, and you know it," snapped the boss. "The organization as it stands hasn't a single stick of dead wood in it. You know very well that a railroad the size of the Short Line can't run without an individual head of the operating department."

Mr. Van Britt laughed a little at that.

"If you should get some one of these new efficiency experts out here he would probably tell you that you could cut your staff right in two in the middle."

I could see that the boss was getting mighty nearly impatient.

"You are merely turning handsprings around the edges of the thing you have come to say, Upton," he barked out. "Come to the point, can't you? What have you got up your sleeve?"

"Nothing that I could make you understand in a

month of Sundays. I'm sore on my job and I want to quit."

"Nonsense! You don't mean that?"

"Yes, I do. I'm tired of wearing the brass collar of a soulless corporation. What's the use, anyway? I found a bunch of dividend checks from my bank at home in the mail to-day, and what good does the money do me? I can't spend it out here; can't even tip the servants at the hotel without everlastingly demoralizing them. I'm like the little boy who wanted to go out in the garden and eat worms."

The boss was frowning thoughtfully.

"You're not giving me a show, Upton," he protested. "Can't you blow the froth off and let me see what's in the bottom of the stein?"

"Pledge you my word, it's all froth, Graham. I want to climb up on the mesa behind the shops and take a good deep breath of free air and shake my fist at your blamed old cow-track of a railroad and tell it to go to the devil. You shouldn't deny me a little pleasure like that."

It was getting under the boss's skin at last. "I can't believe that you really want to resign," he broke out, sort of hopelessly. "It's simply preposterous!"

"Pull it down out of the future and put it in the present, and you've got it," said Mr. Van Britt. "I *have* resigned. I wrote it out on a piece of paper

and dropped it into your mail box as I came through the outer office. It's signed, sealed, and delivered. You'll give me a testimonial, or something of that sort, 'To Whom It May Concern,' won't you? I've been obedient and faithful and honest and efficient, and all that, haven't I?"

"I'd like to know first where you got your liquor, Upton. That is the most charitable construction I can put upon all this. Why, man alive! you're quitting me in the thick of the toughest fight the grafters have put up!"

"Yes, I know; but a man's got only one life to live, and I've always had a sneaking sympathy for the high private in the front rank who didn't want to stand up and get himself shot full of holes. I'm running, and if you should ask me why, I'd tell you what the retreating soldier told Stonewall Jackson; he said he was running only because he couldn't fly."

Once more the boss grew silently thoughtful. Out of the digging mental inquiry he brought this:

"Has this sudden notion of yours anything to do with Sheila Macrae, Upton?"

"Pledge you my word again. I met Sheila on the street to-day and promised her that I wouldn't so much as tip my hat to her while Collingwood is on this side of the Missouri River."

"But if you quit, you'll go East yourself, won't you?"

"Maybe, after a while. For the time being, I'd like to loaf on you for a week or so and watch the wheels go around without my having to prod them. It's running in my mind that this newest phase of the C. S. & W. business is going to stir up a mighty pretty shindy, and I had a foolish notion that I'd like to stick around and look on—as an innocent bystander."

"The innocent bystander usually gets shot in the leg," the boss ripped out, with the brittlest kind of humor. And then: "I suppose I shall have to let you do what you want to—and let you pick your own time for giving me the real reason. But you're crippling me most savagely, Upton—and at a time when I am least able to stand it."

Mr. Van Britt got up and edged his way toward the door.

"It's a good reason, Graham; and sometime—say when we are walking through the pearly gates of the New Jerusalem together—maybe I'll tell you about it. If I were really a good scrapper, I'd stay and help you fight it out with Hatch; but you know the old saying—capital is always cowardly; and my present credit at the Portal City National is pretty well up to a quarter of a million, thanks to the dividends I deposited to-day. Good-night. I'll see you in the morning—if by that time you haven't decided to cut me cold."

I kept right busy over the indexes after Mr. Van Britt went away, just to give the boss a little chance to catch up with himself. He sure was catching it hot and heavy on all sides. The way things had turned out, he couldn't go to the major's any more, and now his railroad organization was beginning to go to pieces on him. It certainly was tough. All we needed now was for President Dunton to come smashing in with one more good jolt and it would be all over but the obsequies, the monument and the epitaph. At least, that is the way it looked to me.

It was along about ten o'clock when the boss closed his desk with a bang and said we'd better saw it off for the night. I walked up-town with him and as we were passing the Bullard he turned in to ask the night clerk if Collingwood was in his room. The answer was nix; that the young New Yorker hadn't been seen since dinner.

On the way out we saw Mr. Van Britt at the telegraph alcove. He had apparently been making good use of his first half-hour or so of freedom. He was handing in a thick bunch of telegrams for transmission, and he rather pointedly turned the sheaf face down upon the marble slab when we came along, as much as to say "it's none of your business what I'm doing."

It struck me as sort of curious that he should have so much wire correspondence when he claimed to

be taking a rest, and why he was so careful not to let us get a glimpse of what it was all about. But the whole thing was now so horribly muddled that a little mystery more or less on anybody's part couldn't make much difference; and that was the thought I took to bed with me a little later after we reached our rooms in the railroad club.

XXVIII

The Beginning of the End

HOWEVER much the Hatch people may have wanted to avoid publicity regarding the change of ownership and policies in the Storage & Warehouse reorganization, the prompt announcement of a general strike of the employees was enough to make every newspaper in the State sit up and take notice.

We had the *Mountaineer* at the breakfast-table in the club grill-room on the morning of the day when the strike was advertised to go into effect. There was a news story, with big headlines in red ink, and also an editorial. Cantrell didn't say anything against the railroad company. His comments were those of an observer who wished to be straightforward and fair to all concerned, but his editorial did not spare the silly local stockholders whose swapping and selling had made the *coup* possible.

Cantrell himself, mild-eyed and looking as if he'd got out of bed about three hours too early, drifted into the grill-room and took a seat at our table before we were through.

"I wanted to be decent about it, Norcross," he said, forestalling anything that the boss might be going to say about the editorial in the *Mountaineer*. "I'm trying to believe that the men higher up in your railroad councils haven't fathered this Hatch scheme of consolidation—which is more than some of the other pencil-pushers will do for you, I'm afraid. Thanks to your publicity measures, everybody believes that you still hold the whip-hand over the combination with your ground leases. I'm not asking what you propose to do; I am merely taking it for granted that you are going to stick to your policy, and hoping that you will come and tell me about it when you are ready to talk."

"I shall do just that," the boss promised; and I guess he would have been glad to let the matter drop at this, only Cantrell wouldn't.

"I lost three good hours' sleep this morning on the chance of catching you here at table," the editor went on. "A little whisper leaked in over the wires last night, or, rather, early this morning, that set me to thinking. You haven't been having any trouble with your own employees lately, have you, Norcross?"

"Not a bit in the world. Why?"

"There is some little excitement, with the public taking a hand in it. There were indignation meetings held last night in a number of the towns

along your lines, and resolutions were passed protesting against the action of the new combination in cutting wages, and asserting that public sentiment would be with the C. S. & W. employees if they are forced to carry out their threat of striking at noon to-day. The whisper that I spoke of intimated that the protest might extend to the railroad employees."

"There's nothing in it," said the boss decisively. "I suppose you mean in the way of a sympathetic strike, and that is entirely improbable. I imagine very few of the C. S. & W. employees belong to any of the labor unions."

"A strike on the railroad would hit you pretty hard just now, wouldn't it?" Cantrell asked.

Mr. Norcross dodged the question. "We're not going to have a strike," he averred; and since we had finished our breakfast, he made a business excuse and we slid out.

When we reached the office we found Fred May already there and at work, and in the middle room Mr. Van Britt was on hand, reading the morning paper.

"You don't get around as early as you might," was the little millionaire's comment when the boss walked in and opened up his desk. "I've been waiting nearly a half-hour for you to show up. Seen the paper?"

The boss nodded.

"I don't mean the strike business; I mean the market quotations."

"No; I didn't look at them."

"They are interesting. P. S. L. Common went up another three points yesterday. It closed at 38 and a fraction. Do you know what that means, Graham?"

"No."

"It means that Uncle Breckenridge and his crowd are already joyfully discounting your coming resignation. Somebody has given them a wire tip that you are as good as down and out, and unless a miracle of some sort can be pulled off, I guess the tip is a straight one. Strong as he is, Chadwick can't carry you alone."

"Drop it," snapped the boss irritably. And then: "Have you come to tell me that you have reconsidered that fool letter you wrote me last night?"

"Not in a million years," returned the escaped captive airily. "I am here this morning as a paying patron of the Pioneer Short Line. I want to hire a special train to go—well, anywhere I please on your jerkwater railroad."

"You don't mean it?"

"Oh, yes, I do. I want a car and a good, smart engine. The Eight-Fifteen will do, with Buck Chandler to run it."

"Pshaw! take your own car and any crew you

please. We are not selling transportation to you."

"Yes you are; I'm going to pay for that train, and what's more, I want your written receipt for the money. I need it in my business. Then, if Chandler should happen to get gay and dump me into the ditch somewhere, I can sue you for damages."

"All right; if you will persist in joking with me it's going to cost you something. How far do you want your train to run?"

"Oh, I don't know; anywhere the notion prods me—say to the west end and back, with as many stops as I see fit to make, and perhaps a run over the branches."

I saw the boss make a few figures on a pad under his hand.

"It would cost anybody else, roughly, something like five hundred dollars. On account of your little joke it's going to cost you a cold thousand."

Mr. Van Britt took out his check-book and a fountain pen and solemnly made out the check.

"Here you are," he said, flipping the check over to the boss's desk. "Now shell out that receipt, so that I'll have it to show if anybody wants to know how much you've gouged me. Since you're making the accommodation cost me a dollar a minute, how long have I got to wait?"

The chief's answer was a push at Fred May's

call button, and when Frederic of Pittsburgh came in:

"Have Mr. Perkins order out my private car for Mr. Van Britt, with the Eight-fifteen and Chandler, engineer. Tell Mr. Perkins to give Chandler and his conductor orders to run as Mr. Van Britt may direct, giving the special right of way over everything except first-class trains in the opposite direction." Then to Van Britt: "Will that do?"

"Admirably; only I'm waiting for that receipt."

Mr. Norcross said something that sounded like "damn," scribbled a memorandum of the thousand-dollar payment on a sheet of the scratch-pad and handed it over, saying: "The order for the car includes my cook and porter, and something to eat; we'll throw these in with the transportation, and if the car is ditched and you sue for damages, we'll file a cross-bill for hotel accommodations. Now go away and work off your little attack of lunacy. I'm busy."

We had an easier day in the office than I had dared hope for, whatever the boss thought about it, though it was an exceedingly busy one. With the strike news in the papers, it seemed as if everybody in town wanted to interview the general manager of the railroad, and to ask him what he was going to do about it.

Following his hard-and-fast rule, Mr. Norcross

didn't deny himself to anybody. Patiently he told each fresh batch of callers that the railroad company had nothing whatever to do with the change in ownership of C. S. & W.; that the railroad's attitude was unaltered; and that, so far as it could be done legally, the Pioneer Short Line would stand firmly between its patrons and any extortion which might grow out of the new conditions.

The C. S. & W. strike—as our wires told us—went into effect promptly on the stroke of noon, and a train from the west, arriving late in the afternoon, brought Ripley. For the first time that day, Mr. Norcross told me to snap the catch on the office door for privacy and then he told Ripley to talk. Our neat little general counsel was fresh from the actual fighting line, and his news amply confirmed the wire reports which had been trickling in.

"The conditions all along the line are almost revolutionary," was Ripley's summing-up of the situation. "Generally speaking, the public is not holding us responsible as yet, though of course there are croakers who are saying that it is entirely a railroad move, and predicting that we won't do anything to interfere with the new graft."

"Cantrell says that public sentiment is altogether on the side of the C. S. & W. strikers," the boss put in.

"It is; angrily so. There is hot talk of a boycott

to be extended to everything sold or handled by the Hatch syndicate. I hope there won't be any effort made to introduce strike-breakers. In the present state of affairs that would mean arson and rioting and bloody murder. You can starve a dog without driving him mad, but when you have once given him a bone it's a dangerous thing to take it away from him."

"I wired you because I wanted to consult you once more about those ground leases, Ripley. Do you still think you can make them hold?"

"If Hatch breaks the conditions, we'll give him the fight of his life," was the confident rejoinder.

"But that will mean a long contest in the courts. Hatch will give bond and go on charging the people anything he pleases. The Supreme Court is a full year behind its docket, and the delay will inevitably multiply your few 'croakers' by many thousands. But that isn't the worst of it. Hatch has a better hold on us than the law's delay." And to this third member of his staff Mr. Norcross told the story of the political trap into which Collingwood and the New York stock-jobbers had betrayed the railroad management.

Ripley's comment was a little like Hornack's; less profane, perhaps, but also less hopeful.

"Good Lord!" he ejaculated. "So that is what Hatch has had up his sleeve? I don't know how

you feel about it, but I should say that it is all over but the shouting. If the Dunton crowd had been deliberately trying to wreck the property, they couldn't have gone about it in any surer way. They haven't left us so much as a gnawed rat-hole to crawl out of."

"That is the way it looked to me, Ripley, at first; but I've had a chance to sleep on it—as you haven't. The gun that can't be spiked in some way has never yet been built. I have the names of the eleven men who were bribed. Hatch was daring enough to give them to me. Holding the affidavits which they were foolish enough to give him, Hatch can make them swear to anything he pleases. But if I could get hold of those papers——"

"You'd destroy them, of course," the lawyer put in.

"No, hold on; let me finish. If I had those affidavits I'd go to these men separately and make each one tell me how much he had been paid by Bullock for his vote."

"Well, what then?"

"Then I should make every mother's son of them come across with the full amount of the bribe, on pain of an exposure which the dirtiest politician in this State couldn't afford to face. That would settle it. Hatch couldn't work the same game a second time."

Ripley let it go at that and spoke of something else.

"I suppose you have seen how our stock is climbing. Has the new situation here anything to do with it?"

Mr. Norcross said he thought not, and rather lamented that we didn't have better information about what was going on at the New York end of things. Also, he told Ripley something that I hadn't known; that he had wired Mr. Chadwick asking the wheat king to give him a line on what the stock-kiting meant. Then Ripley asked for orders.

"There is nothing to be done until Hatch begins to raise his prices," he was told. "But I wanted to have you here in case anything should break loose suddenly." And at that Ripley went away.

We were closing our desks to go to dinner when Fred May came in to say that a delegation of the pay-roll men was outside and wanting to have a word with the "Big Boss." Mr. Norcross stopped with his desk curtain half drawn down.

"What is it, Fred?" he asked.

"I don't know," said the Pittsburgher. "I should call it a grievance committee, if it wasn't so big. And they don't seem to be mad about anything. Bart Hoskins is doing the talking for them."

"Send them in," was the curt command, and a

minute later the inner office was about three-fourths filled up with a shuffling crowd of P. S. L. men.

The chief looked the crowd over. There was a bunch of train- and engine-men, a squad from the shops, and a bigger one from the yards. Also, the wire service had turned out a gang of linemen and half a dozen operators.

"Well, men, let's have it," said Mr. Norcross, not too sharply. "My dinner's getting cold."

"We'll not be keepin' you above the hollow half of a minute, Mister Norcross," said the big, bearded freight conductor who acted as spokesman. "About this C. S. & W. strike that went on to-day: we'd like to know, straight from you, if it's anything in the railroad company's pocket to have all these old men fired out and a lot of scabs put in on starvation wages to ball us all up when we try to work with 'em."

"It's nothing to us; or rather, I should say, we are on the other side," was the short reply. "You probably all know that C. S. & W. has changed hands, and the old Red Tower syndicate, with Mr. Rufus Hatch at its head, is now in control."

Hoskins nodded. "That's about what we allowed, and we've come up here to say that we're almighty sorry for these poor cusses that have been dumped out o' their jobs. We ain't got no kick comin' with you, n'r with the company, Mister Nor-

cross, but it looks like it's up to us to do somethin', and we didn't want to do it without hittin' square out from the shoulder."

"I'm listening," said the chief.

"The union locals have called a meetin' f'r to-night. There ain't nobody knows yet what's goin' to be done, but whatever it is, we want you to know that it ain't done ag'inst you n'r the railroad company."

The boss had handled wage earners too long not to be able to suspect what was in the wind.

"You men don't want to let your sympathies carry you too far," he cautioned. "When you take up another fellow's quarrel you want to be pretty sure that you're not going to hit your friends in the scrap."

Hoskins grinned understandingly, and I guess the boss was a little puzzled by the nods and winks that went around among the silent members of the delegation; at least, I know I was.

"That's all right," Hoskins said. "Bein' the Big Boss, you've got to talk that way. They might reach out and grab you fr'm New York if you didn't. But what I was aimin' to say is that there'll be a train-load 'r two of strike-breakers a-careerin' along here in a day 'r so, and we ain't figurin' on lettin' 'em get past Portal City, if that far."

"That's up to you," said Mr. Norcross brusquely. "If you start anything in the way of a riot——"

"Excuse *me*. There ain't goin' to be no riotin', and no company property mashed up. Mr. Van Britt, he——"

It was right here that an odd thing happened. Con Corrigan, a big two-fisted freight engineer standing directly behind Hoskins, reached an arm around the speaker's neck and choked him so suddenly that Hoskins's sentence ended in a gasping chuckle. When the garroting arm was withdrawn the conductor looked around sort of foolishly and said: "I'm thinking that's about all we wanted to say, ain't it, boys?" and the deputation filed out as solemnly as it had come in.

I guess Mr. Norcross wasn't left wholly in the dark when the tramping footfalls of the committee died away in the corridor. That unintentional mention of Mr. Van Britt's name looked as if it might open up some more possibilities, though what they were I couldn't imagine, and I don't believe the general manager could, either.

After that, things rocked along pretty easy until after dinner. Instead of going right back to the office from the club, Mr. Norcross drifted into the smoking-room and filled a pipe. In the course of a few minutes, Major Kendrick dropped in and pulled up a chair. I don't know what they talked about,

but after a little while, when the boss got up to go, I heard him say something that gave the key to the most of what had gone before, I guess.

"Have you seen or heard anything of Collingwood since yesterday?"

The good old major shook his head. "I haven't seen, but I have heard," he said, sort of soberly. "They're tellin' me that he's oveh in his rooms at the Bullard, drinkin' himself to death. If he wasn't altogetheh past redemption, suh, he would have had the decency to get out of town befo' he turned loose all holts that way; he would, for a fact, Graham."

At that, Mr. Norcross explained in just a few words why Collingwood hadn't gone — why he couldn't go. Whereupon the old Kentuckian looked graver than ever.

"That thah spells trouble, Graham. Hatch is simply invitin' the unde'takeh. Howie isn't what you'd call a dangerous man, but he is totally irresponsible, even when he's sobeh."

"We ought to get him away from here," was the boss's decision. "He is an added menace while he stays."

I didn't hear what the major said to that, because little Rags, Mr. Perkins's office boy, had just come in with a note which he was asking me to give to Mr. Norcross. I did it; and after the note had

been glanced at, the chief said, kind of bitterly, to the major:

"You can never fall so far that you can't fall a little farther; have you ever remarked that, major?" And then he want on to explain: "I have a note here from Perkins, our Desert Division superintendent. He says that the 'locals' of the various railroad labor unions have just notified him of the unanimous passage of a strike vote—the strike to go into effect at midnight."

"A strike?—on the *railroad?* Why, Graham, son, you don't mean it!"

"The men seem to mean it—which is much more to the purpose. They are striking in sympathy with the C. S. & W. employees. I fancy that settles our little experiment in good railroading definitely, major. We'll go out of business as a common carrier at midnight, and it's the final straw that will break the camel's back. Dunton doesn't want a receivership, but he'll have to take one now."

"Oh, my deah fellow!" protested the major. "Let's hope it isn't going to be so bad as that!"

"It will. The bottom will drop out of the stock and break the market when this strike news gets on the wire, and that will end it. I wish to God there were some way in which I could save Mr. Chadwick: he has trusted me, major, and I—I've failed him!"

XXIX

The Murder Madman

I KNEW what we were up against when we headed down to the railroad lay-out, the chief and I, leaving the good old major thoughtfully puffing his cigar in the club smoking-room. With a strike due to be pulled off in a little more than three hours there were about a million things that would have to be jerked around into shape and propped up so that they could stand by themselves while the Short Line was taking a vacation. And there was only a little handful of us in the headquarters to do the jerking and propping.

But it was precisely in a crisis like this that the boss could shine. From the minute we hit the tremendous job he was all there, carrying the whole map of the Short Line in his head, thinking straight from the shoulder, and never missing a lick; and I don't believe anybody would ever have suspected that he was a beaten man, pushed to the ropes in the final round with the grafters, his reputation as a successful railroad manager as good as gone, and

his warm little love-dream knocked sky-winding forever and a day.

Luckily, we found Fred May still at his desk, and he was promptly clamped to the telephone and told to get busy spreading the hurry call. In half an hour every relief operator we had in Portal City was in the wire-room, and the back-breaking job of preparing a thousand miles of railroad for a sudden tie-up was in full swing. Mr. Perkins, as division superintendent, was in touch with the local labor unions, and a conference was held with the strike leaders. Persuading and insisting by turns, Mr. Norcross fought out the necessary compromises with the unions. All ordinary traffic would be suspended at midnight, but passenger trains *en route* were to be run through to our connecting line terminals east and west, live-stock trains were to be laid out only where there were feeding corrals, and perishable freight was to be taken to its destination, wherever that might be.

In addition to these concessions, the strikers agreed to allow the mail trains to run without interruption, with our promise that they would not carry passengers. Hoskins and his committee bucked a little at this, but got down when they were shown that they could not afford to risk a clash with the Government. This exception admitted, another followed, as a matter of course. If the mail trains

were to be run, some of the telegraph operators would have to remain on duty, at least to the extent of handling train orders.

With these generalities out of the way, we got down to details. "Fire-alarm" wires were sent to the various cities and towns on the lines asking for immediate information regarding food and fuel supplies, and the strike leaders were notified that, for sheer humanity's sake, they would have to permit the handling of provision trains in cases where they were absolutely needed.

By eleven o'clock the tangle was getting itself pretty well straightened out. Some of the trains had already been abandoned, and the others were moving along to the agreed-upon destinations. Kirgan had taken hold in the Portal City yard, and by putting on extra crews was getting the needful shifting and car sorting into shape; and the Portal City employees, acting upon their own initiative, were picketing the yard and company buildings to protect them from looters or fire-setters. Mr. Van Britt's special, so the wires told us, was at Lesterburg, and it was likely to stay there; and Mr. Van Britt, himself, couldn't be reached.

It was at half-past eleven that we got the first real yelp from somebody who was getting pinched. It came in the shape of a wire from the Strathcona night operator. A party of men—"mine owners"

the operator called them—had just heard of the impending railroad tie-up. They had been meaning to come in on the regular night train, but that had been abandoned. So now they were offering all kinds of money for a special to bring them to Portal City. It was represented that there were millions at stake. Couldn't we do something?

Mr. Norcross had kept Hoskins and a few of the other local strike leaders where he could get hold of them, and he put the request up to them as a matter that was now out of his hands. Would they allow him to run a one-car special from the gold camp to Portal City after midnight? It was for them to say.

Hoskins and his accomplices went off to talk it over with some of the other men. When the big freight conductor came back he was alone and was grinning good-naturedly.

"We ain't aimin' to make the company lose any good money that comes a-rolling down the hill at it, Mister Norcross," he said. "Cinch these here Strathcona hurry-boys f'r all you can get out o' them, and if you'll lend us the loan of the wires, we'll pass the word to let the special come on through."

It was sure the funniest strike I ever saw or heard of, and I guess the boss thought so, too—with all this good-natured bargaining back and forth; but there was nothing more said, and I carried the word

to Mr. Perkins directing him to have arrangements made for the running of a one-car special from Strathcona for the hurry folks.

Past that, things rocked along until the hands of the big standard-time clock in the despatcher's room pointed to midnight. Mr. Norcross and I were both at Donohue's elbow when the men at the wires, east and west, clicked in their "Good-night," which was the signal that the Pioneer Short Line had laid down on the job and gone out of business. I couldn't compare it to anything but a funeral bell, and that's about what it was. No matter how short the strike might be, it was going to smash us good and plenty. And whatever else might come of it, it was a cinch that it would squeeze the last little breath of life out of the Norcross management for good and all.

As if to confirm that sort of doleful foreboding of mine, Norris, who was holding down the commercial wire, came over to the counter railing just then with a New York message. I saw the boss's eyes flash and the little bunchy muscle-swellings of anger come and go on the edge of his jaw as he read it, and then he handed it to me.

"You may endorse that 'No Answer' and file it when you go back to the office," he said shortly, and then he went on talking to Donohue, telling him how to handle the trains which were still out and moving to their tie-up destinations.

Of course, I read the message; I knew there was nothing private about it so far as I was concerned, since it had been given me to put away in the files. It was dated from the Waldorf-Astoria at midnight, which, allowing for the difference in time between New York and Portal City, meant that it had been sent at nine o'clock by our time. Somebody in our neck of woods was evidently keeping in close wire touch with Mr. Dunton, for though the strike vote was only a little more than an hour old when he sent the telegram, he evidently knew all about it. This is what I read:

"To G. NORCROSS, G. M.,
"Portal City.

"Your administration has been a conspicuous failure from the beginning. Compromise with employees on any terms offered and prevent strike at all costs. That done, you are hereby directed to wire your resignation to take effect one week from to-day.

"B. DUNTON, *President.*"

It had hit us at last; not a decent request, mind you, but a blunt, brutal demand. The boss was fired. No word had come from Mr. Chadwick, and there could be but one reason for his silence. In some way, perhaps through the late boosting of the

stock, the New Yorkers had squeezed him out. We were shot dead in the trenches.

I didn't understand how the chief could take it so quietly, unless it was because he had been hammered so long and so hard that nothing mattered any more. Anyhow, he was just standing there, talking soberly to Donohue, when once more the Strathcona branch sounder began to click furiously, snipping out the headquarters call.

Donohue cut in and we all heard the Strathcona man's new bleat. The way he told it, it seemed that one member of the party that had chartered the special to come to Portal City had got left, and this man was now in the Strathcona wire office, bidding high for an engine to chase the train and put him aboard.

At first the boss said, "No," short off, just like that; adding that it wouldn't be keeping faith with the strike committee. But at that moment Hoskins blew in again, and when he was told what was on the cards, he took a little responsibility of his own.

"Go to it, Mister Norcross, if there's any more money in it f'r the railroad," he told the boss. "I'll stand f'r it with the boys." And then to Donohue: "Who'll be runnin' this chaser engine?"

"It'll be John Hogan and the Four-Sixteen," said Donohue. "There's nobody else at that end of the branch."

The arrangement, such as it was, was fixed up quickly. The man who was putting up the money seemed to have plenty of it. He was offering five hundred dollars for the engine, and a thousand if it should overtake the special that side of Bauxite Junction.

I guess the bleat unravelled itself pretty clearly for all of us; or at least, it seemed plain enough. A mining deal of some kind was on, and this man who was left behind was going to be left in another sense of the word if he couldn't butt in soon enough to break whatever combination the others were stacking up against him.

In just a few minutes we got the word from the Strathcona operator that the money was paid and the chaser engine was out and gone. The special train had fully a half-hour's start, and with the hazardous grades of Slide Mountain and Dry Canyon to negotiate, it didn't seem probable that the light engine could overtake it anywhere north of Bauxite. That wasn't up to us, however. Kirgan had come in to say that our good-natured strikers had thrown a guard into the shops and were patrolling the yard, when Fred May showed up, making signals to me. I heard him when he edged up to the boss and said: "There's a lady in the office, wanting to see you, Mr. Norcross."

"Holy Smoke!" said I to myself. I knew it

couldn't be anybody but Mrs. Sheila, at that time of night, and I saw seventeen different kinds of bloody murder looming up again when I tagged along after the boss on the trip down the hall to our offices.

The guess was right, both ways around. It was Mrs. Sheila, and she had the major with her. And the air of the private office was so thick with tragedy that it made the very electrics look dim and ghostly. Mrs. Sheila didn't have a bit of color in her face, and her eyes had a big horror in them that was enough to make your flesh creep.

I won't attempt to tell all that was said, partly by the good old major and partly by Mrs. Sheila. But the gist of it was this: Collingwood had continued his booze fight in his rooms at the Bullard until he had worked himself up to the crazy murder pitch. Then he had gone on the warpath, hunting for Hatch. Just how he had contrived to dodge Hatch's spotters, who were doubtless keeping cases on him, did not appear. But that was a detail. He had dodged them, had learned that Hatch and a bunch of his Red Tower backers had gone to Strathcona on a mining deal, and had started to drive to the gold camp in an auto to get his man.

Before leaving Portal City he had written a letter to Mrs. Sheila, telling her what he was going to do, and that when he got through with it, she would be free. The letter, which had been left at the hotel,

had been delayed in delivery—had, in fact, just been sent out to the major's house by the night clerk who had found it.

Long before the story could get itself fully told, the different gaps in it were filling themselves up for me—and for Mr. Norcross, as well, I guess. When Mrs. Sheila came to the auto-drive part of it, the boss whirled and shot an order at me.

"Jimmie, chase into the despatcher's office and find out the name of the man who chartered that following engine!" he snapped; and I went on the run, remembering that in the strike excitement and hustle it hadn't occurred to anybody to ask the man's name or that of the particular "mine owner" who had chartered the special train.

Donohue got the Strathcona operator in less than half a minute after I fired my order at him, and the answer came almost without a break:

"Charter of special train was to R. Hatch, of Portal City, and of engine 416 to man named Collingwood."

Gosh! but this did settle it! I didn't run back to the office with the news—I flew. It was like firing a gun in amongst the three who were waiting, but it had to be done. The major groaned and said, "Oh, good God!" and Mrs. Sheila sat down and put her face in her hands. The boss was the only one who knew what to do and he did it: vanished

like a shot in the direction of the despatcher's office.

In about fifteen of the longest minutes I ever lived he came back, shaking his head. I knew what he had been doing, or trying to do. There was one night telegraph station on the branch—at a mining-camp half-way down the grade on Slide Mountain—and he had been trying to get word there to stop the wild engine.

"He has either bribed or bullied his engine crew," he told the major. "I wired and had a stop signal set for them at the Antonio Mine, but they overran it, going at full speed down the hill."

It was plain enough now what Collingwood was trying to do. The murder mania had got a firm hold of its weapon. Collingwood knew that Hatch was on the special, and he was going to chase that one-car train until it made a stop somewhere and then smash into it for blood. After Mr. Norcross had talked hurriedly for a minute or two with the major he went back to the despatcher's room and I went with him. There was a word for Donohue, telling him to call all night stations ahead of the special. The operators were to give the special the "go-ahead," and after it had passed, to set their signals against the following engine.

As Donohue cut in on the branch wire, Nippo, at the canyon mouth, broke in to say that the special

had gone by fifteen minutes earlier, and that the following engine was now coming down the canyon. Donohue grabbed his key.

"Throw signal against engine 416," he clicked; and a few seconds later we got the reply:

"No good. Engine 416 overran signal."

"Never mind," said the boss to Donohue; "keep it up at the other stations. That engine has got to be stopped. It's carrying a madman." This is what he said, but I knew well enough what he was thinking. He was remembering that the special now had a lead of only fifteen minutes, and that it would be obliged to stop at Bauxite for its orders over the main line.

He did what he could to cut out the Bauxite stop for the special, ordering Donohue to tell the junction man to set his signals at "clear" for the train, and at "stop" for the 416. It was only a makeshift. In the natural order of things the engineer of the special would make the Bauxite stop anyway, signal or no signal, since it is a nation-wide railroad rule that no train shall pass a junction without stopping.

Past that the boss grabbed up an official time-card and began to study it hurriedly and to jot down figures. I wondered if he wasn't tempted—just the least little bit in the world, you know.

Here was a thing shaping itself up—a thing for

which he wasn't in the least responsible—and if it should work out to the catastrophe that nobody seemed to be able to prevent, the chief of the grafters, and probably a number of his nearest backers, would be wiped off the books; and Collingwood's death, which, in all human probability, was equally certain, would set Mrs. Sheila free.

He must be thinking of it, I argued; he couldn't be a human man and not be thinking of it. But he never stopped his hasty figuring for a single instant until he broke off to bark out at Kirgan, who was standing by:

"Quick, Mart! I want a light engine, and somebody to run it! Jump for it, man!"

Kirgan, big and slow-motioned at most times, was off like a shot. Then the boss hurried back down the hall to his own offices, and again I tagged him. The old major was standing at a window with his hands behind him, and Mrs. Sheila was sitting just as we had left her, with the big terror still in her eyes and her face as white as a sheet.

"We can't stop him without throwing a switch in front of him, and that would mean death to him and his two enginemen," said the boss, talking straight at the major, and as if he were trying to ignore Mrs. Sheila. "I'm going to take a long chance and run down the line to meet them. There's

a bare possibility that I can contrive to get between the train and the engine, and if I can——"

Mrs. Sheila was on her feet and she had her hands clasped as if she were going to make a prayer to the boss. And it was pretty nearly that.

"Take me!" she begged; "oh, *please* take me. It's my *right* to go!"

Kirgan had found an engine somewhere in the yard and was backing it up to the station platform. We could hear it. I saw that the chief was going to turn Mrs. Sheila down—which was, of course, exactly the right thing to do. But just then the major shoved in.

"Sheila knows what she's talking about, Graham," he said quietly. "When you-all find Howie, you'll have a madman on your hands—and she's the only one who can control him at such times—God pity her! Take us both, suh."

I suppose Mr. Norcross thought there wasn't any time to stand there arguing about it.

"As you will," he snapped at the major; and then to me: "Break for it, Jimmie, and tell Kirgan to get a car—any car—the first one he can find!"

I broke, and came pretty near breaking my blessed neck tumbling down the stairs. Kirgan had found his engine and had picked up a yard man to fire it. I told him what was wanted, and in less than no time he had pulled out an empty day-coach from the

washing track. While he was backing in with it, Mr. Norcross came down the platform with the major and Mrs. Sheila. He let the major help Mrs. Sheila up the steps of the coach and ran forward to call out to Kirgan:

"Donohue is clearing for you, and there'll be nothing in the way. Run regardless to Timber Mountain 'Y.' You have six minutes on the special's time to that point, if you run like the devil!" And then, as he was climbing to the cab, he ripped out at me: "Jimmie, you go back and stay with them in the car. Hurry or you'll be left!"

XXX

Under the Wide and Starry Sky

I SURE had to be quick about obeying that "get-aboard" order of Mr. Norcross's. Kirgan had jerked the throttle open the minute the word was given. I missed the forward end of the car, and when the other end came along my grab at the hand-rod slammed me head over heels up the steps. Kirgan was holding his whistle valve open, and the guarding strikers in the yard gave us room and a clear track. By the time we had passed the "limit" switches we were going like a blue streak, and I could hardly keep my balance on the back platform of the day-coach.

You can guess that I didn't stay out there very long. The night was clear as a bell and pretty coolish, with the stars burning like white diamonds in the black inverted bowl of the sky. It was mighty pretty scenery, but just the same, after Kirgan had fairly struck his gait on the long western tangent, I clawed my way inside. It was a lot too blustery and unsafe on that back platform.

The major and Mrs. Sheila were sitting together, near the middle of the car. I staggered up and took the seat just ahead of them, and the major asked me if Mr. Norcross was on the engine. I told him he was, and that ended it. What with the rattle and bang of the coach, the howling of the speed-made wind in the ventilators, and the shrill scream of the spinning wheels, there wasn't any room for talk during the whole of that breath-taking race to the old "Y" in the hills beyond Banta.

Knowing, from what Mr. Norcross had said, the point at which we were going to side-track and wait for the special and the wild engine, I grew sort of nervous and worked-up after we had crashed through the Banta yard and the day-coach began to sway and lurch around the hill curves. What if the special had been making better time than the boss had counted upon? In that case, we'd probably hit her in a head-ender somewhere on one of those very curves. And with the time we were making, and the time she'd be making, there wouldn't be enough left of either train to be worth picking up.

A mile or so short of the "Y" siding I went up ahead and handed myself out to the forward platform to see if I couldn't get a squint past the storming engine. I got it now and then, on the swing of the curves, but there was nothing in sight. Just the

same, it was mighty scary, and I took a relief breath so deep that it nearly made me sick at my stomach when I finally realized that Kirgan had shut off and was slowing for the stop at the farther switch of the old "Y."

What was done at the switch was done swiftly, as men work when they have the fear of death gripping at them. If the special should come up while we were making the back-in, the result would be just about the same as it would have been if we had met it on the curves.

The jerking tug of the self-preservation instinct is pretty strong, sometimes, and I tumbled off the steps of the car as it was backing in around the western curve of the "Y." Our picked-up fireman was at the switch, setting it again for the main line. With our own engine silent, I could hear a faint sound like the far-away fluttering of a safety-valve. We were not ten seconds too soon. The special was coming.

Mr. Norcross, who was still in the engine cab, shot an order at Kirgan.

"Fling your coat over the headlight, and then be ready to snatch it and get off!" he shouted. "If they see it as they come up, it may stop them!" Then, catching a glimpse of me on the ground: "Break the coupling on the coach, Jimmie—quick!"

As I jumped to obey I understood what was to

be done. The fireman at the switch was to let the special go by, and then the boss—just the boss alone on the engine—was to be let out on the main track to put himself between the chaser and the chased. It was a hair-raising proposition, but perhaps—just perhaps—not quite so suicidal as it looked. With skilful handling the interposed engine might possibly be kept out of the way by backing, and its warning headlight shining full into the eyes of the men in the 416's cab would surely be enough to stop them —if anything would.

I got the coupling broken on the car to set our engine free before the distant flutter noise had grown to anything more than a humming like that of an overhead swarm of angry bees. Kirgan was standing on the front end, with his coat thrown over the headlight, ready to jerk it off and jump when he got the word. Out at the switch, our fireman was keeping out of sight so that the engineer of the special shouldn't see him, and maybe get rattled and stop. As usual, the boss had covered every little detail in his instructions, and had remembered that the sight of a man standing at a switch in a lonesome place like this might give an engineer a fit of "nerves" and make him shut off steam.

I had just finished uncoupling the day-coach and the boss was easing our engine ahead a bit to make sure that she was loose, when the car-door opened

behind me and the major and Mrs. Sheila came out in the front vestibule. It was Mrs. Sheila who spoke to me, and her voice had borrowed some of the big terror that I had seen in her eyes while she was sitting in the office at Portal City.

"Where — whereabouts are we, Jimmie?" she asked.

I didn't get a chance to tell her. Before I could open my mouth the black shadows of the crooked valley beyond the switch were shot through with the white, shimmering glow of a headlight beam, and a second later the special flicked into view on the curve of approach.

When we first saw it, the engine was working steam, and she was running like a streak of lightning. But as we looked, there was a short, sharp whistle yelp, the brakes gripped the wheels, the one-car train, with fire grinding from every brake-shoe, came to a jerking stop a short car-length on our side of the switch, and a man dropped from the engine step to go sprinting to the rear. And it was plain that neither the engineer nor the man who was running back saw our outfit waiting on the leg of the old "Y."

Kirgan was the first one to understand. With a shout of warning, he jumped and ran toward the stopped train, yelling at the engineer for God's sake to pull out and go on. Back in the hills beyond

the curve of approach another hoarse murmur was jarring upon the air, and the special's fireman, who was the man we had seen jump off and go running back, and who, of course, didn't know that we had our man there, was apparently trying to reach the switch behind his train to throw it against the following engine to shoot it off on the "Y."

By this time the boss was off of our engine and racing across the angle of the "Y" only a little way behind Kirgan. He realized that his plan was smashed by the stopping of the special, and that the very catastrophe we had come out to try to prevent was due to happen right there and then. Whatever our man waiting at the switch might do, there was bound to be a collision. If he left the points set for the main line, the wild engine would crash into the rear end of the stopped special; and if he did the other thing, our engine and coach standing on the "Y" would get it.

"Get the people out of that car!" I heard the boss bellow, but even as he said it the pop-valve of the stopped engine went off with a roar, filling the shut-in valley with clamorings that nothing could drown.

Two minutes, two little minutes more, and the sleep-sodden bunch of men in the special's car might have been roused and turned out and saved. But the minutes were not given us. While the racing

fireman was still a few feet short of the switch the throwing of which would have saved the one-car train only to let the madman's engine in on our engine and coach, and our man—already at the switch—was too scared to know which horn of the dilemma to choose, the end came. There was the flash of another headlight on the curve, another whistle shriek, and I turned to help the Major take Mrs. Sheila off our car and run with her, against the horrible chance that we might get it instead of the special.

But we didn't get it. Ten seconds later the chasing engine had crashed headlong into the standing train, burying itself clear up to the tender in the heart of the old wooden sleeper, rolling the whole business over on its side in the ditch, and setting the wreckage afire as suddenly as if the old Pullman had been a fagot of pitch-pine kindlings and only waiting for the match.

If I could write down any real description of the way things stacked up there in that lonesome valley for the little bunch of us who stood aghast at the awful horror, I guess I wouldn't need to be hammering the keys of a typewriter in a railroad office. But never mind; no soldier sees any more of a battle than the part he is in. There were seven of us men, including the engineer and fireman of the special, who were able to jump in and try to do something,

and, looking back at it now, it seems as if we all did what we could.

That wasn't much. About half of the people in the sleeping-car—six by actual count, as we learned afterward—were killed outright in the crash or so badly hurt that they died pretty soon afterward; and the fire was so quick and so hot that after we had got the wounded ones out we couldn't get all of the bodies of the others.

As you'd imagine, the boss was the head and front of that fierce rescue fight. He had stripped off his coat, and he kept on diving into the burning wreck after another and yet another of the victims until it seemed as if he couldn't possibly do it one more time and come out alive. He didn't seem to remember that these very men were the ones who had been trying to ruin him—that at least once they had set a trap for him and tried to kill him. He was too big for that.

After we had got out all the victims we could reach, there was still one more left who wasn't dead; we could hear him above the hissing of the steam and the crackling of the flames, screaming and begging us to break in the side of the car and kill him before the fire got to him. Kirgan had found an axe in the emergency box of our day-coach, and was chopping away like a madman.

The minute he got a hole big enough, the big

master-mechanic dropped his axe and climbed down into the choking hell where the screams were coming from. Our fireman picked up the axe and ran around to the other side of the wreck where Jones, the engineer of the special, and his fireman were trying to break into the crushed cab of the 416.

The old major, the boss, and I stood by to help Kirgan, and the minute his head came up through the chopped hole we saw that he needed help. He had pried the screaming man loose, somehow, and was trying to drag him up out of the smoking furnace. It was done, amongst us, some way or other. Kirgan had wrapped the man up in a Pullman blanket to keep the fire from getting at him any worse than it already had, and as we were taking him out the blanket slipped aside from his face and I saw who it was that the master-mechanic had risked his life for. It was Hatch, himself, and he died in our arms, the major's and mine, while we were carrying him out to where Mrs. Sheila was tearing one of the Pullman sheets that I had got hold of into strips to make bandages for the wounded.

With the chance of saving maybe another one or two, we couldn't stay to help the brave little woman who was trying to be doctor and nurse to half a dozen poor wretches at once. But she took time to ask me one single breathless question:

"Have they found him yet?—you know the one I mean, Jimmie?"

"No," I said. "They're digging away at that side now," and then I ran back to jump in again.

Though the fire was now licking at everything in sight, Kirgan, who had taken the axe from our fireman, had managed to cut some of the car timbers out of the way so that we could see down into the tangle of things where the cab of the 416 ought to have been. There wasn't much left of the cab. The water-gauge was broken, along with everything else, but in spite of the reek of smoke and steam we could see that Hogan and his fireman were not there. But down under the coal that had shifted forward at the impact of the collision we could make out the other man—the murder-maniac—lying on his back, black in the face and gasping.

That was enough for the boss. It looked like certain death for anybody to crawl down into that hissing steam-bath, but he did it, wriggling through the hole that Kirgan had chopped, while two or three of us ran to the little creek that trickled down on the far side of the "Y" and brought back soaking Pullman blankets to try to delay the encroaching fire and smother the steam-jets.

I couldn't see very well what the boss was doing; the smoke and steam were so blinding. But when I did get a glimpse I saw that he was digging fran-

tically with his bare hands at the shifted coal, and that he had succeeded in freeing the head and shoulders of the buried man, who was still alive enough to choke and gasp in the furnace-like heat.

Kirgan stood it as long as he could—until the licking flames were about to drive us all away.

"You'll be burnt alive—come up out of that!" he yelled to the boss; but I knew it wouldn't do any good. With Collingwood still buried down there and still with the breath of life in him, the boss was going to stay and keep on trying to dig him out, even if he, himself, got burned to a crisp doing it. Loving Mrs. Sheila the way he did, he couldn't do any less.

It was awful, those next two or three minutes. We were all running frantically back and forth, now, between the wreck and the creek, soaking the blankets and doing our level best to beat the fire back and keep it from cutting off the only way there was for the boss to climb out. But we could only fight gaspingly on the surface of things, as you might say. Down underneath, the fire was working around in front and behind in spite of all we could do. Some of it had got to the coal, and the heavy sulphurous smoke was oozing up to make us all choke and strangle.

Honestly, you couldn't have told that the boss was a white man when he crawled up out of that

pit of death, tugging and lifting the crushed and broken body of the madman, and making us take it out before he would come out himself. We got them both away from the fire as quickly as we could and around to the other side of things, Kirgan and Jones carrying Collingwood.

The poor little lady we had left alone with the rescued ones had done all she could, and she was waiting for us. When we put Collingwood down, she sat down on the ground and took his head in her lap and cried over him just like his mother might have, and when the boss knelt down beside her I heard what he said: "That's right, little woman; that's just as it should be. Death wipes out all scores. I did my best—you must always believe that I did my best."

She choked again at that, and said: "There is no hope?" and he said: "I'm afraid not. He was dying when I got to him."

I tried to swallow the big lump in my throat and turned away, and so did everybody else but the major, who went around and knelt down on the other side of Mrs. Sheila. The wreck was blazing now like a mighty bonfire, lighting up the pine-clad hills all around and snapping and growling like some savage monster gloating over its prey. In the red glow we saw a man limping up the track from the

west, and Kirgan and I went to meet him. It was Hogan, the missing engineer of the 416.

He told us what there was to tell, which wasn't very different from the way we'd been putting it up. They—Hogan and his fireman—hadn't suspected that they were carrying a maniac until after they had passed Bauxite and Collingwood had told them both that what he wanted to do was to overtake the special and smash it. Then there had been a fight on the engine, but Collingwood had a gun and he had threatened to kill them both if they didn't keep on.

"I kep' her goin'," said the Irishman, "thinkin' maybe Jonesy'd keep out of my way, or that at the lasht I'd get a chanst to shut the 'Sixteen off an' give her the brake. He kep' me fr'm doin' it, and whin I saw the tail-lights, I pushed Johnnie Shovel off an' wint afther him because there was nawthin' else to do. Johnnie's back yondher a piece, wid a broken leg."

Just then Jones, the special's engineer, came up, and he pieced out Hogan's story. The wire to Bauxite had warned him that a crazy man was chasing him and overrunning stop-signals. He had thought to side-track the chaser at the old "Y" and that was what he had stopped for.

Thereupon the three of us went after the crippled fireman, and when we got back to the "Y" with

him it was all over. Collingwood had died with his head in Mrs. Sheila's lap, and the boss, fagged out and half dead as he must have been, was up and at work, getting the wreck victims into our day-coach, which had been backed up and taken around to the other leg of the "Y" to head for Portal City.

When it came time for us to move Collingwood, Mrs. Sheila pulled her veil down and walked behind the body, with the good old major locking his arm in hers, and that choking lump came again in my throat when I remembered what Collingwood had said to the boss the night he came to our office: "Sheila made her wedding journey with me once, when she was just eighteen. The next time she rides with me it will be at my funeral."

I guess there's no use stretching the agony out by telling about that mournful ride back to Portal City with the dead and wounded. We left the wreck blazing and roaring in the shut-in valley at the gulch mouth because there wasn't anything else to do; Kirgan and Jones and one of the firemen handled the engine and pulled out, while the rest of us rode in the day-coach and did what we could for the suffering.

At Banta we made a stop long enough to let the boss send a wire to Portal City, turning out the doctors and the ambulances—and the undertakers; and though it was after three o'clock in the morning

when we pulled in, it seemed as if the whole town had got the word and was down at the station to meet us.

I couldn't see Mrs. Sheila's face when the major helped her off at the platform; her veil was still down. But I did hear her low-spoken word to the boss, whispered while they were carrying Collingwood and Hatch, and two of the others who were past help, out to the waiting string of dead-wagons.

"I shall go East with the body to-morrow—to-day, I mean—if the strikers will let you run a train, and Cousin Basil will go with me. We may never meet again, Graham, and for that reason I must say what I have to say now. Your opportunity has come. The man who could do the most to defeat you is dead, and the strike will do the rest. If I were you, I should neither eat nor sleep until I had thought of some way to take the railroad out of the hands of those who have proved that they are not worthy to own it."

I didn't know, just then, how much or little attention Mr. Norcross was paying to this mighty good, clear-headed bit of business advice. What he said went back to that saying of hers that they might never meet again.

"We must meet again—sometime and somewhere," he said. And then: "I did my best: God knows I did my best, Sheila. I would have given

my own life gladly if the giving would have saved Collingwood's. Don't you believe that?"

"I shall always believe that you are one of God's own gentlemen, Graham," she said, soft and low; and then the major came to take her away.

XXXI

P. S. L. Comes Home

I DIDN'T get more than five hours' sleep after the excitement was all over, and we had ourselves driven, Mr. Norcross and I, up to the club. But by nine o'clock the next morning, as soon as I'd swallowed a hurried bite of breakfast in the grill-room I swiped a camp-stool and a magazine out of the lounge and trotted up-stairs to plant myself before the boss's door, determined that nobody should disturb him until he was good and ready to get up.

He turned out a little before twelve, looking sort of haggard and drawn, of course, and having some pretty bad burns on the side of his neck and on the backs of both hands. But he was all there, as usual, and he laid a good, brotherly hand on my shoulder when he saw what I was doing.

"They don't make many of them like you, Jimmie," he said. And then: "Have you any news?"

I had, a little, and I gave it to him. Fred May had come tip-toeing up into my sentry corridor about ten o'clock to tell me that Mr. Perkins had arranged

with the strikers to have a special go east with the major and Mrs. Sheila and Collingwood's body to catch the Overland at Sedgwick; and I told the boss this, and that the train had been gone for an hour or more.

Also, I gave him a sealed package that a strange boy had brought up just a little while after May went away. We took the elevator to the grill-room for something to eat, and at table Mr. Norcross opened the package. It contained a bunch of affidavits, eleven of them in all, and there was no letter or anything to tell where they had come from.

He handed the papers over to me, after he had seen what they were, and told me to take care of them, and, when the waiter was bringing our bite—or rather after he had brought it and was gone—he sort of frowned across the table at me and said: "Do you know what it means—this surrender of those bribe affidavits, Jimmie?"

I said I guessed I did; that Hatch being dead, and Collingwood, too, there wasn't nerve enough left in the Red Tower outfit to keep up the fight; that the surrender of the affidavits was kind of a plea for a let-up on our part.

"We'll begin to show them, in just about fifteen minutes, Jimmie," was the short comment. "Reach over and get that telephone and tell Mr. Ripley and Mr. Billoughby that I want them to meet me at my

office at half-past twelve. 'Any news from the strike?"

"Nothing," I told him, while "Central" was getting me Mr. Ripley's number. "Fred May said it was going on just the same; everything quiet and nothing doing, except that the wrecking train had gone out to pick up the scraps at Timber Mountain 'Y'. Kirgan is bossing it, and the strikers manned it for him."

Nothing more was said until after I had sent the two phone messages, and then the boss broke out in a new spot.

"Has anything been heard from Mr. Van Britt?" he asked.

"Not that I know of."

Again he gave me that queer little scowl across the table.

"Jimmie, have you found out yet why Mr. Van Britt insisted on quitting the service?"

I guess I grinned a little, though I tried not to.

"Mr. Van Britt is one of the best friends you've got," I said. "He thought you needed this strike, and he wanted to go out among the pay-roll men and sort of help it along. He couldn't do a thing like that while he was an officer of the company and drawing his pay like the rest of us."

"I might have known—he as good as told me," was the reply, made kind of half-absently; and then,

short and quick: "How's the stock market? Have you seen a paper?"

I had seen both papers, at breakfast-time, but of course they had nothing startling in them except a last-minute account of the wreck at Timber Mountain "Y," grabbed off just before they went to press. They couldn't have anything later from New York than the day before. But Fred May had tipped me off when he came up to tell me about the Major Kendrick special. The newspaper offices were putting out bulletins by that time.

I told Mr. Norcross about the bulletins and was brash enough to add: "We're headed for the receivership all right, I guess; our stock has tumbled to twenty-nine, and there's a regular dog-fight going on over it at the railroad post in the Exchange. Wall Street's afire and burning up, so they say."

The chief hadn't eaten enough to keep a cat alive, but at that he pushed his chair back and reached for his hat.

"Come on, Jimmie," he snapped. "We've got to get busy. And there isn't going to be any receivership."

We reached the railroad headquarters—which were as dead and quiet as a graveyard—a little before Mr. Ripley and Billoughby got down. But Mr. Editor Cantrell was there, waiting to shoot an anxious question at the boss.

"Well, Norcross, are you ready to talk now?"

"Not just yet; to-morrow, maybe," was the good-natured rejoinder.

"All right; then perhaps you will tell me this: Do you, yourself, believe that four or five thousand railroad men have gone on strike out of sheer sympathy for a few hundred C. S. & W. employees, most of whom are merely common laborers?"

The boss spread his hands. "You have all the facts that anybody has, Cantrell."

"Can you look me in the eye and tell me that you haven't fomented this eruption on the quiet to get the better of the Red Tower crowd in some way?" demanded the editor.

"I can, indeed," was the smiling answer.

Cantrell looked as if he didn't more than half believe it.

"Being a newspaper man, I'm naturally suspicious," he put in. "There are big doings down underneath all this that I can smell, but can't dig up. Everything about this strike is too blamed good-natured. I've talked with half a dozen of the leaders, and with any number of the rank and file. They all grin and give me the wink, as if it were the best joke that was ever pulled off."

Again Mr. Norcross smiled handsomely. "If you push me to it, Cantrell, I may say that this is exactly their attitude toward me!"

"Well," said the editor, getting up to go; "it's doing one thing to you, good and proper. Your railroad stock is tumbling down-stairs so fast that it can't keep up with itself."

"I hope it will tumble still more," said the boss, pleasantly, with another sort of enigmatic smile; and with that Mr. Cantrell had to be content.

As the editor went out, Fred May brought in the bunch of forenoon telegrams and laid them on the desk. They were quickly glanced at and tossed over to me as fast as they were read. Most of them were plaintive little yips from a strike-stricken lot of people along the Short Line who seemed to think that the world had come to an end, but there were three bearing the New York date line and signed "Dunton." The earliest had been sent shortly after the opening of the Stock Exchange, and it ran thus:

"Morning papers announce strike and complete tie-up on P. S. L. Why no report from you of labor troubles threatening? Compromise at any cost and wire emphatic denial of strike. Answer quick."

The second of the series had been filed for transmission an hour later and it was still more saw-toothed.

"Later reports confirm newspaper story. Your failure to compromise instantly with employees will break stock market and subject you to investigation for criminal incompetency. Answer."

The third message had been sent still later.

"Your continued silence inexcusable. If no favorable report from you by six o'clock you may consider yourself discharged from the company's service and criminal proceedings on charge of conspiracy will be instituted at once."

There was no mention of Collingwood, and I could only imagine that Major Kendrick's telegram had not yet reached the president. I thought things were beginning to look pretty serious for us if Mr. Dunton was going to try to drag us into the courts, but Mr. Norcross was still smiling when he handed me the last and latest telegram in the bunch that May had brought in. It was from Mr. Chadwick, and was good-naturedly laconic.

"To G. Norcross, G. M.,
"Portal City.

"Just returned from trip to Seattle. What's doing on the Short Line?

"Chadwick."

"A couple of telegrams, Jimmie," said the chief, as he passed this last wire over, and I got my notebook ready.

"To B. Dunton, New York. Strike is sympathetic and not subject to compromise. Mails moving regularly, but all other traffic suspended indefinitely.

My office closes to-day, and my resignation, effective at once, goes to you on Fast Mail to-night."

"Now one to Mr. Chadwick, and you may send it in code," he directed crisply. Then he dictated:

"See newspapers for account of strike. Hatch and eight of his associates were killed last night in railroad wreck. Dunton has demanded my resignation and I have given it. Have plan for complete reorganization along lines discussed in beginning, and need your help. At market opening to-morrow sell P. S. L. large blocks and repurchase in driblets as price goes down. Repeat until I tell you to stop. Wire quick if you are with us."

Just as I was taking the last sentence, Mr. Ripley and Billoughby came in, and Mr. Norcross took them both into the third room of the suite and shut the door. An hour later when the door opened and they came out, the boss was summing up the new orders to Billoughby: "There's a lot to do, and you have my authority to hire all the help you need. See the bankers yourself, personally, and get them to interest other local buyers along the line, the more of them, and the smaller they are, the better. I'll take care of Portal City, myself. I've had Van Britt on the wire and he is taking care of the employees—yes, that goes as it lies, and is a part of the original plan; every man who works for P. S. L. is going to own a bit of stock, if we have to carry him

for it and let him pay a dollar a week. More than that, they shall have representation on the board if they want it. And while you're knocking about, take time to show these C. S. & W. folks how they can climb back into the saddle. Red Tower is down and out, now, and they can keep it out if they want to."

. . . . . .

I suppose I might rattle this old type-machine of mine indefinitely and tell the story of the financial fight that filled the next few days; of how the boss and Mr. Ripley and Billoughby got the bankers and practically everybody together all along the Short Line and sprung the big plan upon them, which was nothing less than the snapping up, on a tumbling stock market, of the opportunity now presented to them of owning—actually *owning* in fee simple—their own railroad, the buying to be done quietly through Mr. Chadwick's brokers in Chicago and New York.

There was some opposition and jangling and seesawing back and forth, of course, but the newspapers, led by the *Mountaineer,* took hold, and then, pretty soon, everybody took hold; after which the only trouble was to keep people—our own rank and file among them—from buying P. S. L. Common

so fast that the New Yorkers would catch on and run the price up.

They didn't catch on—not until after it was too late; and the minute Mr. Chadwick wired us from Chicago that we were safe, the strike went off, as you might say, between two minutes, and Mr. Norcross called a meeting of stockholders, the same to be held—bless your heart!—in Portal City, the thriving metropolis of the region in which, counting Mr. Chadwick in as one of us, a good, solid voting majority of the stock was now held. The *Mountaineer* printed the call, and it spoke of the railroad as "*our* railroad company"!

The meeting was held in due time, and Mr. Chadwick was there to preside. He made a cracking good chairman, and the way he dilated on the fact that now the country—and the employees—had a railroad of their own, and that the whole nation would be looking to see how we would demonstrate the problem we had taken over, actually brought cheers—think of it; cheers in a railroad stockholders' meeting.

Following Mr. Chadwick's talk there was the usual routine business; reports were read and it was shown that the Short Line, notwithstanding all the stealings and mismanagements was still a good going proposition at the price at which it had been bought in. A new board of directors was chosen, and as

soon as the new board got together, Mr. Norcross went back to his office in the headquarters, not as general manager, this time—not on your life!—but as the newly elected president of Pioneer Short Line. And by the same token, the first official circular that came out—a copy of which I sent, tied up with a blue ribbon, to Maisie Ann—read like this:

"To all Employees:

"Effective this day, Mr. James F. Dodds is appointed Assistant to the President with headquarters in Portal City.

"G. NORCROSS, *President.*"

That's all; all but a little talk between the boss and Mr. Upton Van Britt that took place in our office on the day after Mr. Van Britt, still kicking about the hard work that the boss was always piling upon him, had been appointed general manager.

"You've made the riffle, Graham—just as I said you would," said our own and only millionaire, after he had got through abusing the fates that wouldn't let him go back East and play with his coupon shears and his yachts and polo ponies. "You're going to be the biggest man this side of the mountains, some day; and the day isn't so very far off, either."

It was just here that the boss got out of his chair

and walked to the other end of the room. When he came back it was to say:

"You think I have won out, Upton, and so does everybody else. I suppose it looks that way to the man in the street. But I haven't, you know. I have lost the one thing for which I would gladly give all the business success I have ever made or hope to make."

Mr. Van Britt's smile was more than half a grin.

"It isn't lost, Graham: it's only gone before. Can't you wait a decent little while?"

"If I should wait all my life it wouldn't be long enough, Upton," was the reply. "What you said to me—that time when we first spoke of Collingwood—was true. You said she loved the other man—and so she did."

This time Mr. Van Britt's smile was a whole grin.

"I said it, and I'll say it again. She didn't realize it or admit it, even to herself you know; she's too good and clean-hearted for anything like that. But I could see it plainly enough, and so could everybody else except the two people most nearly concerned. I didn't mean Howie Collingwood: you were the 'other man,' Graham.'

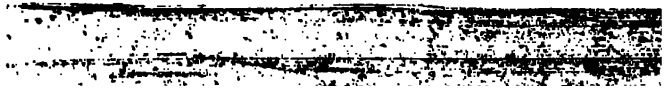
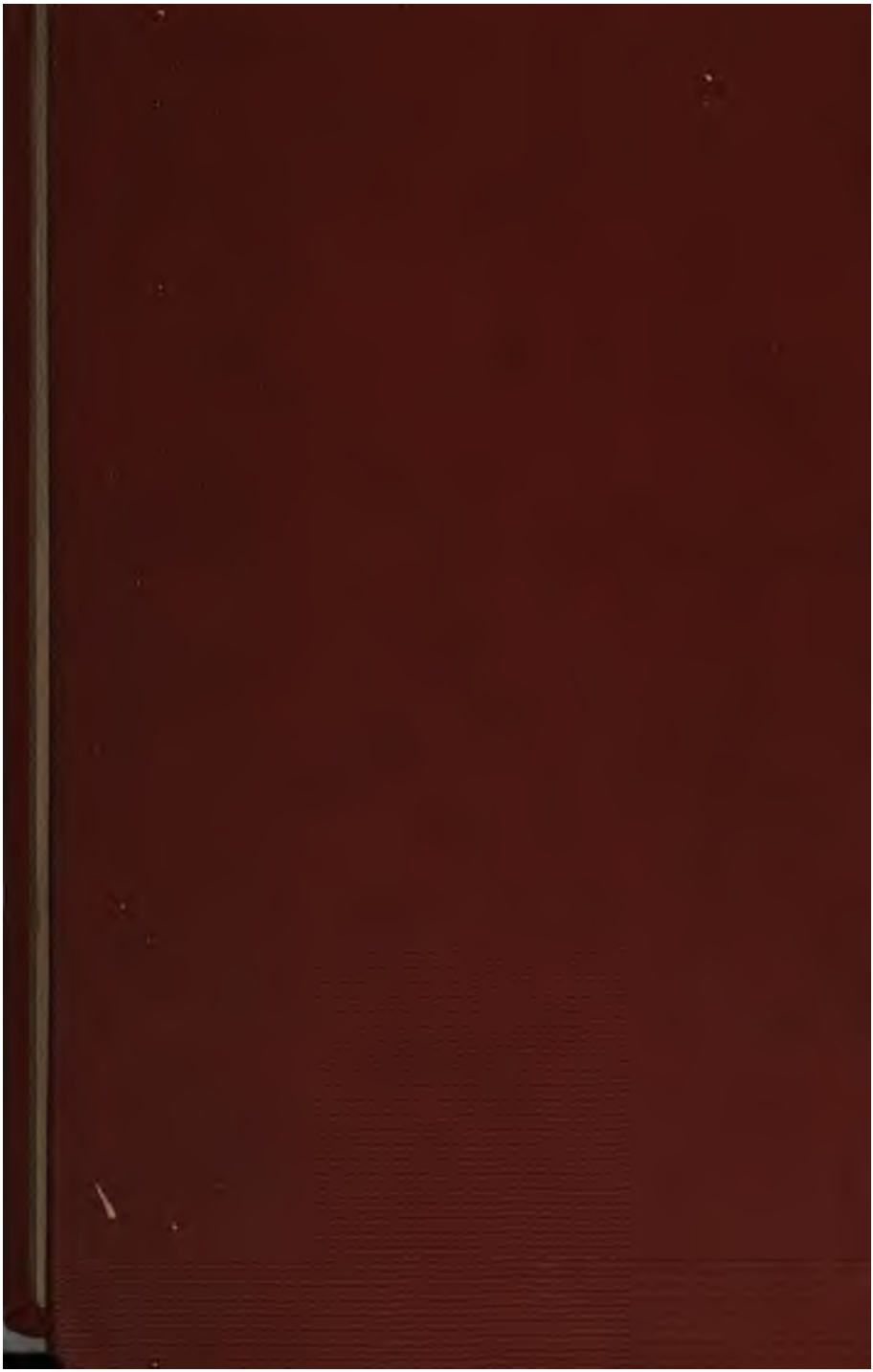
At this the boss whirled short around and tramped to the other end of the room again, standing for quite a little while with one foot on the low window-sill and making out like he was looking down at the

traffic clattering along in Nevada Avenue. But I'll bet a quarter he never saw a single wheel of it. When he came back our way his eyes were shining and he put his hand on Mr. Van Britt's shoulder.

"It ought to have been you, Uppy," he said, dropping back to the old college nickname. "You're by long odds the better man. When—when do you think I might venture to take a little run across to New York?"

At that, Mr. Van Britt laughed out loud.

"Ho! ho!" he said. "I suppose I ought to say a year. You can wait one little year, can't you, Graham?"

"Not on your life!" rasped the boss. And then: "I'll tell you what I'll do; I'll compromise with the proprieties, or whatever it is that you're insisting on, and make it six months. But that's the limit—the absolute limit!"

And so it was.